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Re: Person I Knew¹

LILI LEVI*

John's illness was long, his suffering tremendous, and his courage obvious. His death came far too early. He had many things left to say, do and enjoy. Much Bill Evans to play. But it doesn't help me to think about that. Instead, I want to talk a little about the unexpected gift of John's friendship. That makes me remember him in his prime — arms crossed or chin in hand, mischievous smile barely creasing his lips.

I first encountered John in 1980 as a student in his class on Conflict of Laws. I enjoyed his subtle humor and complex ideas then, but — notwithstanding his warmth and accessibility — didn't get to know him. (I must admit to having had a rather bad attitude about Harvard Law School at the time — I couldn't wait to leave the premises after each class, regardless of who taught it.) I encountered him again shortly thereafter through reading his monumental work *Democracy and Distrust*. But it was only here at the University of Miami that over the years, John and I developed a strong and quiet friendship. I had not expected to become friends with an icon. It could not have happened if John had not been the kind, fair, empathetic, appreciative and open-minded anti-icon he was.

People say that John was shy, and he was. But he also had a wonderful capacity for friendship. He maintained lifelong friends, but, in fact, this very private person also made new friends, not fearing to reveal himself. Under the “cone of silence”² — where each of us agreed that we wouldn't discuss our conversations with anyone else — John and I talked about anything and everything.

When I was expecting the arrival of my daughter Nina, he talked of his beloved children and grandchildren (to whom he was bemusedly Pop-Pop). He marveled at the warmth and caring of his then-friend and now-wife Gisela. Having led an extraordinary life and met amazing people, John remained an equal opportunity raconteur. I could count on his being equally interesting in his stories about “the Chief” (as he still called Chief Justice Earl Warren), the Warren Commission, his time as a public defender, deaning at Stanford, studying logic at Princeton, diving in the Keys, snapping pictures at Angkor Wat, and even his past as a

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1. BILL EVANS TRIO, *Re: Person I Knew*, on MOON BEAMS (Riverside Records 1962).

2. *Get Smart* (NBC/CBS television series, 1965-70).

child model (did everybody know that but me?). John had met everyone, it seemed. We laughed over the coincidence that Tink Thompson, one of the earliest Kennedy assassination conspiracy theorists and an acquaintance of John's, had taught me philosophy in college (before dropping out of academia to become a private investigator!). Six degrees of separation indeed.

Of course, John was brilliant. Just as important, he had the knack of writing simply, elegantly and often with great wit about the most complex things. These gifts might have led him to be distant and dismissive of others. And surely he was impatient at times and did not suffer fools or knaves gladly. Yet he was egalitarian and unpretentious. He enjoyed talking to people who were not over-awed by his vita. He was not interested in celebrity (except to the extent that it could get him a really quiet hotel room to ensure sleep).

Shortly before he died, John showed me a booklet that he had received for a reunion at Princeton. His classmates had written puffing updates about their lives, recounting their successes and touting their eminence. John had simply sent in a picture of himself, standing rakishly in front of a movie poster of a scantily clad Jeanne Moreau, to which he appended the caption "With Jeanne Moreau in Paris, a long time ago!" Nuff said!

Let me share one last story told to me by a student about the puckish John. Early in his time here at UM, influenced no doubt by his love of diving, John asked to teach admiralty one semester. Somehow class discussion veered to the topic of sailors and tattoos. One student apparently voiced her disdain for tattoos as *déclassé* in the extreme. The next day, John took off his jacket in class and slowly began to raise his arm in the course of making a point. Peeking out from beneath his polo shirt sleeve was a henna tattoo he had applied to his upper arm for the occasion. Who among us cannot imagine John's totally deadpan delivery, perfect timing, and cheeky amusement when the class finally got the joke and erupted in laughter?

It's been more than four months, and it's still hard to believe that John is not here. Not at the next faculty meeting, not in his office, not in his reading chair smoking a pipe, not at Scotty's Landing watching the boats. I miss him very much.