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Now That Was Magnetism

BY CRAIG LEE MONTZ

Certainly, volumes could be filled with stories of Richard Hausler. I offer three stories. The first two are typical and, for me, personify both the admiration and fear my students had for him. The third is the only substantial conversation I ever had with him and the one I have always told my students.

INTRODUCTION

Without so much as saying a word to him, I began to know him many years ago. I remember the first time someone pointed him out to me. He had a rakish walk and mischievous grin which portrayed a man who had deviously avoided missing a good moment in life. He always wore a coat and tie, in spite of the uncharitable Miami sun. Wherever he went, he was in a dialogue with a cluster of students. It was a sight incomparable to any other on campus. He was an ideograph of confidence, a fountain of inspiration, and a veritable incarnate of vitality - even in his seventies. You never had to hear what he was saying. By the way he opened the palms of his hands or shrugged his shoulders, you could see his response was a continuous variation of "But what if. . .?" or "What does that mean?" You could actually see his students try to comprehend thoughts that were astoundingly unfamiliar as they walked away from him. Then, another student would take their place. Why students continued to follow him would seem completely senseless if you were unaware of the fact that what he had exquisitely assembled in the heart of each of them was never less than this: the contagious urge to understand. To watch him perform his craft was to witness something more than just a unique style. This was inimitable. This was immortal. This was artistry. Every day at the law school was a canvas for him. And Professor Richard Hausler was a master artist.

THE FIRST STORY

Each August, my first-year students would come to my office and read a list of their professors. By this time, they had only been through a week of classes. After we had gone through all their classes, there remained the matter of their contracts professor which, by no happenstance, was saved for last. This was a common scenario:

"Who do you have for Contracts?"

"Hausler," they would exhale.

"Well, I can tell you that—"

"I know all about him."

"Already?"

"Who doesn't?"

"That's great."

"No, that's not *great*."

"Why?"

"Did you ever have him?"

"No, but—"

"Then you just don't know what *it's* like."

It, of course, referred to both him and his class. He did not just teach. He virtually never lectured. *It* referred to the fact that contracts with Hausler was, by all accounts, an *event*. I had never been one of his students but my students provided me with the next best thing. It started like this:

"What's he like?"

They always replied, "I can't. It doesn't work like that."

"No?"

"No."

"It's something you just have to see," they would explain.

"Then show me."

"You want me to show you what *he's* like?"

"Do you think you could do that?"

". . . Yeah. . ."

They began by raising their eyebrows and drawing a deep breath. Then, they leaned toward me with unblinking eyes.

"Now Doctor, what exactly is a 'meeting of the minds'?"

All color immediately drained out of their face as they dissolved into mocking the role of the student.

"You want to, um, know what that is?"

And then back to him -

"Yes. . . what does that mean?"

As the student -

"Um, I think it means like two people's thoughts are sort of joined to make a contract, or something."

Now right back to him -

"Oh, Doctor. . ."

With a palm pressed against their forehead, they exhibited the bottomless horror of "Where do I even begin?"

"Do you mean to tell me that two skulls open up, and the gray

matter from one meets the other in mid-air, resulting in some sort of offer, acceptance, and other contractual terms?"

And then they would dissolve back into their own persona, as though a spell had been graciously broken. But as soon as they were done, they would start laughing - every one of them. They discovered the caricature they had just portrayed was, in fact, infectiously amusing. Even in spite of this realization, they would never let their guard down. One student told me that Professor Hausler had said, "You really shouldn't take me so seriously." It was truly good advice except for one thing: only a fool would take it.

THE SECOND STORY

By the middle of the first semester, I could always count on a student being in my office instead of in class. The scene was highly repetitive.

"Shouldn't you be in a class right now?"

"Yes."

"Which one?"

"Contracts."

"With Hausler?"

"Right."

And then they would change the subject. I always persisted.

"Wait a minute. Why aren't you in Hausler's class?"

"I'm unprepared."

"If he calls on you, so what?"

"I'm not going."

"Why not?"

"Are you kidding? Forget it."

"What's the absolute worse that you think could happen?"

"That's exactly why I'm here."

THE THIRD STORY

I attended an end-of-the-year faculty dinner held in a small Italian restaurant. The tables had been placed together in zig-zagging rows with chairs on each side. After parting through people and wading through the small eddies of remaining space, I began to sit down. For the first time, I looked over to the person who was just sitting down directly across from me. It was Richard Hausler.

I remember thinking, "What on earth am I going to say?" Inwardly, I prayed that the daunting figure across the table would spare me the animated interrogation my students had portrayed so often.

After we exchanged greetings, to my astonishment, he folded his hands, placed them on the table, and said absolutely nothing. Nothing at all. His eyes darted around the room. Long minutes passed.

"Nice place," I said.

". . . Yes. . . it is," he said without eye contact.

And then, he took an immediate interest in a tray carried by a waiter, a picture on the wall, a purse left on the table, or as I discovered, *anything* to avoid direct eye contact. It wasn't because he had little to say. This is the story my students never believed.

He was actually a little shy.

This was an aspect of Professor Hausler they never saw. And it was the one I wish they had seen. In spite of the social demands of the setting, he was more than just being himself. He *revealed* himself as honestly as possible. And then, only a moment later, he literally glowed and radiated for hours, as we talked inexhaustibly through dinner. There was no classroom act, no professorial persona. Instead, dinner with Professor Hausler was like having dinner with one of your oldest best friends. He was genuine, witty, vulnerable, confident, captivating, detached, casual, formal, light, heavy, sarcastic, sincere, and all the contradictions that make up one of the most magnetic, charismatic, and affable personalities you could ever meet.

Only once that evening, during a discussion of art, did he ever carry the conversation with his signature interrogation style, but without orchestration or self-awareness.

"If Michelangelo had spent every waking moment of his life sculpting *The Pieta* and nothing else"

"Nothing else?" I asked.

"Day and night, just *The Pieta*, for eighty nine years."

"That assumes he would have started from birth."

"Of course," he said as though the assumption was excruciatingly obvious.

"Based on that one work alone," he continued, "wouldn't you agree history would still have regarded him as a master artist?"

"Based on one work?"

"Yes, but one work worthy of ten thousand by virtually any other artist."

". . . then, I suppose."

"You only suppose?" he asked leaning towards me with a grin.

"Oh, of course, yes, yes, absolutely," I said.

"Of course," he said.

The meaning of this conversation stayed with me because this is what he did. He engaged you with provoking thoughts that lasted for

years. He was literally that impressive. In your mind, you could hear, "What does that mean?" It was a question I asked myself repeatedly.

Like everyone else, when I heard he had passed away, I wanted to reach over the horizon and pull the sun back up into the sky, back to one of those days when he walked through the law school surrounded by students. Teaching was only one of his works; one which, I am confident, he must have begun at birth because his work was worthy of ten thousand by any other. Richard Hausler was a master artist. I had a privileged glimpse of his extraordinary gift, although I have clearly resolved it wasn't enough. It would only last me for the rest of my life.