

ARNO CUMMING BECHT

ARTHUR ALLEN LEFF*

In the autumn of 1964, when I arrived at the law school to begin the first, most important, year of my teaching life, I was thoroughly and profoundly ignorant. Not just deeply uninformed about “the law”; I was that, of course, but that’s easily curable: you just work at it as you go, and after a while you know enough of your subject to handle it before people who, after all, know nothing about it at all.

Nor was the significant gap the spot where pedagogical technique ought to have been. That too was true, but that too is comparatively easy: once again, you just do it, and after a while you are what you are, and teach as you teach, and it either works or it doesn’t (at which point, if you’re not too stupid, you find another trade).

No, the critical ignorance was more fundamental: I did not know what I was to be about, what the shape and purpose of my new and peculiar profession *ought* to be. I knew, that is, at least pretty well, “the law.” What I didn’t know, in the role I had chosen, was my proper self.

When I arrived, the law school was a small place, about two hundred students in all, only fourteen teachers (including the Dean), and three of us had just arrived. It was a little school, in part of a little old building, possessed of a pretty library. Off the stacks of that library all the faculty offices opened, and almost all the time almost all those doors stood open, especially (though a tricky side door, followed by a hard right turn), Arno’s door.

Those literally and figuratively open doors were, for all the new teachers, the most important thing about the school. It was through them that we went and looked to see what real law teachers did. For me at least, Arno Becht’s door was the most important one. Not really because the message he broadcast was different from the others, but because of the totality, coherence, and intensity of his version of what proper teaching was. What I saw was this:

Arno, twenty-five years or so into teaching, at a time when he knew

* Professor of Law, Yale Law School. B.A., 1956, Amherst College; LL.B., 1959, Harvard University.

his subjects so completely that he could have coasted the year through on a few minutes a day of preparation, changing his teaching materials every year, keeping up on reading whatever came out as it came out, preparing each day's class as if it was his first day as a new teacher in a new course at a new school;

Arno, teased about his continual revision of his outlines and teaching notes, looking up, serious and concerned, protesting that it was really quite clear, the law of torts, and it must be his fault if some of them didn't seem quite to catch on;

Arno, desperate to get to work of his own, grading his exams, slowly, meticulously, thoughtfully, thoroughly, often as not starting all over when three-quarters done because "Maybe I didn't give sufficient attention to that particular approach," or "I think I was unfair at the beginning, maybe expecting too much," and then sighing with guilt at taking so long at his grading that the students were anxious and restless;

And finally, Arno, his remaining working time invaded by a new teacher with a pile of "what do you do if" and "when do you" and "if they, then what" questions, stopping everything, patiently to answer, to supply citations, teaching tricks, congratulations and condolences, softly, thoughtfully, diffidently but, oh my, successfully.

Look, except for one book Arno coauthored (which is still living scholarship, and will continue to be so as long as its unsolvable subject remains unsolved), I never read any of Arno's writings. After all, it would be hard to exaggerate the intensity of my uninterest in the amendment of corporate charters, or even in the grand old law of torts. I don't think we discussed his work much, nor mine for that matter, though Lord knows I tended to be pushy enough about it. All that is nothing. What I learned from Arno in those first years of my teaching was not the trivia of legal scholarship, or even "the law," but, by watching him at his job, Arno's acted out and acted upon message of what it was to be a law teacher if one would be one nobly, to wit: A law teacher is a teacher of students of law. They are one's charge and responsibility. A trustee's relationship to his widow and orphan beneficiaries is part-time and pallid next to that of a law teacher to his students. Nothing is more important, neither books, nor articles, nor consulting, nor money, nor advancement in the trade. You *are* allowed to complain about students, to stare stupefied at the heavens which allow such answers to be made in class, which still suffer that student to live who is—again—so ostentatiously unprepared. You *are* allowed occasion-

ally to explode, even without pedagogic premeditation, when the nicest of points has once more been brutally buried in some student's home-made fudge. But you are not allowed to abandon them for anything else, for nothing else is as important. A teacher is to teach—students, yes, and other teachers too, when they are just starting out and have to be taught what it is to be a teacher.

I wish I could say that I had quite managed to go and do likewise. But at least I learned early, mostly from Arno, what it was I ought to have gone and been doing.