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A TRIBUTE TO L. HART WRIGHT FROM A FRIEND AND FORMER STUDENT

*Warren Elliott**

I remember Hart Wright as a teacher. In a school renowned for its teachers, Hart Wright stood out.

The question of why he was so popular and effective in the classroom is not a simple one. I'm not sure I really understand it, and I know I'm not able to define it clearly, but there are some aspects we can easily recognize.

It probably had little to do with his predilection for eight o'clock classes in order to try to get the best and most eager students. I'm reasonably sure it had nothing to do with his skills at intimidating unprepared students — a fame that he retained in later, more mellow and gentle years. When we knew him fresh out of World War II, still bearing a lot of the mannerisms of command that he had exercised during the war, we came prepared and sat on the edge of our seats waiting for a scathing comment or a hurled eraser if he decided our answer was inadequate. In recent years, the students still came to his classes well prepared and paid strict attention. But the penalties for failure seemed much less frightening.

This mellowing may be attributable to the aging process but some credit should go to his wife, Phyllis. I know that Phyllis tried occasionally to help this Former Army Colonel understand the advantages of gentle persuasion. (The famous Sally Katzen incident, described in her tribute herein, however, illustrates the extent to which his military background could warp the implementation of her sound advice.)

The point remains that Hart Wright heightened the learning experience outside as well as inside the classroom. Whether by striking and dramatic means or by friendly persuasion, he induced us to come to class well prepared and to pay attention. Then, with his unique skills and personality he was able to involve his students in an exciting intellectual interplay about the law. Even in a huge classroom with more than 100 students he could develop an intimate dialogue. Hart Wright could lecture with the best, but it was his way

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with the Socratic method that earned for him the reputation of a master teacher.

To a casual observer this skill might have appeared to be a natural talent, but I happen to know that he worked hard at it. I am told that even long after he was a well-established and popular teacher, he would spend hours diagramming and working out a plan for presenting a particular issue or case. Anyone who watched him at work could see how the careful preparation allowed him to move through those large classrooms involving the entire group while carrying on a dialogue with one of them. Yes, he was a natural teacher who loved teaching; he also worked very hard at it.

Additionally, there are some abstruse aspects of his skills that are beyond my ability to define. It is enough to say that somehow he managed to open our minds to the drama and excitement of the law. His own extraordinary vitality and intensity about public policy and the law spilled over not only to those who knew him personally but also to the thousands of students who only spoke with him in a classroom.

It is all the more impressive that he induced this excitement around taxes, a subject matter that some find rather boring and esoteric, appealing more to accountants and mathematicians than lawyers. Hart Wright, however, made taxes exciting — but then, he could have made civil procedure exciting. He could bring out the human tensions and drama behind the case, the regulation or the Code provision. Through his own excitement about it, the drama of the law came through to the students and we came to understand it as he did.

At the same time, we came to appreciate his idealism, which was always tempered with realism. Few were more idealistic than Hart Wright but he worked effectively in a very pragmatic field. In one of his major research projects with the Internal Revenue Service, his reformist inclinations developed a more workable tax collection process that ultimately became law. And so it was in his classes; his zeal for a fairer world did not overbalance his objective of producing lawyers skilled in advocacy for their tax clients.

However you describe it this was teaching at its best and we all came to love him. I gather that in recent years it had become axiomatic that one should not leave the Law School without a class from L. Hart Wright. Yes, he was the complete teacher. Under six deans from the 40's to the 80's, he brought his own very special dynamism and excitement. There is now a great emptiness for all of us who knew him. But consider what a large piece of immortality he ac-

quired through his teaching skills. Few will have their values and attitudes live on through so many people who learned so much of the law and living from L. Hart Wright.

In a Law School distinguished by its teachers, L. Hart Wright stood out.