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RONALD J. COFFEY, MASTER MENTOR

Gary J. Simson[†]

In my year and a half as Dean of the Case Western Reserve University School of Law, I have spent a fair amount of time, both in Cleveland and in my travels, meeting graduates of the law school. Not surprisingly, they at times have named one or another faculty member as profoundly influencing their careers. Very surprising, however, is the frequency with which the professor named has been Ron Coffey. I have not kept a tally sheet, but my best guess is that the score is something like: Ron Coffey 50%, The Rest of the Faculty in the Past Forty Years Combined 50%. And even those remarkable numbers do not adequately capture the depth of the gratitude and allegiance that some of Ron's former students feel toward him. As various of them have told me, Ron's teaching fundamentally changed the direction of their careers, and his readiness in the years after their graduation to help them grapple with difficult questions that they have encountered in practice further cemented an already very special bond.

Perhaps even more striking than the lifetime mentorships that Ron has formed with a significant number of his students are the relationships that he has formed with some of his faculty colleagues at the law school. Whether as a result of their training or as a result of whatever inside them drew them to law and law teaching in the first place, law faculty are an especially independent-minded lot. It is rare to see them act toward one another with any high degree of deference, and even rarer to see them so admiring of a colleague as to allow their relationship to take on a form approximating mentee and mentor. It is a tribute to the power of Ron's intellect and the seriousness and rigor with which he probes for elusive answers that some of his colleagues here relate to him in that way.

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Unlike the three others writing tributes to Ron in this issue of the Case Western Reserve Law Review, I cannot claim to know him for twenty or more years. In fact, he and I only met for the first time a year and a half ago, when I joined the Case Western Reserve law faculty as the new dean. However, in that year and a half, I have had the good fortune to get to know Ron quite well.

Early on, Ron and I recognized that we have some very basic values in common. From that recognition has grown a genuine appreciation for one another's views, even when our views rather markedly diverge. Conversations with Ron are invariably memorable whatever the topic, because his intellectual curiosity knows almost no bounds. When something sparks Ron's interest, which is often, Ron is not content with superficial answers. As I was about to start writing this tribute, I ran into Ron, and he unwittingly supplied me with a wonderful illustration of this point.

Ron and I had not seen one another since I had been sidelined by a freakish injury a few weeks before. To my surprise, Ron, whose tastes in music are decidedly classical (Rachmaninoff, to be exact), began by saying that he had been looking into buying me a book about Bob Dylan as a get-well gift but that he ultimately decided against doing so on the thought that the likelihood was slim that any book on the topic was not already mine. When I expressed my appreciation that Ron would take the time to explore such uncharted territory for him, he surprised me even more. Ron explained that after hearing me in my graduation address last May refer to Dylan as "the greatest poet of our time," he could not resist investigating for himself this seemingly extravagant claim.¹ He then proceeded to discuss with me a number of notable facts about Dylan that he had gleaned from several Dylan websites and that many a casual fan would have missed. All this from a man whose knowledge of Dylan prior to my graduation address essentially began and ended with "Blowin' in the Wind!"²

Ron will be missed in the classroom, but as an emeritus faculty member, he will continue to be a source of knowledge and inspiration for faculty here and elsewhere and for the many former students with whom he keeps in touch. I look forward to many more fascinating conversations with someone whom I am honored to have as a colleague and a friend.

¹ In fact, according to my notes, I actually prefaced this characterization with a "perhaps." However, truth be told, I did so more out of politeness to those in the audience who might disagree than out of any conviction that accuracy called for such a qualifier.

² Of course, a good argument can be made that if a person is to know only one Dylan song—or even if a person is to know only one song!—"Blowin' in the Wind" is the one to know. For present purposes, however, I see no need to press the point.