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Tribute to Professor Peter M. Gerhart

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Kenneth F. Ledford[†]

I met Peter Gerhart now thirty years ago, in early February 1991. I had come to Case Western Reserve to interview for an appointment in the Department of History, and because of my research focus on German legal professionals, David Van Tassel, David Hammack, Mike Grossberg, and others had arranged for me to meet with faculty in the School of Law. I first met with Mel Durchslag, who had just finished his term as academic dean, and at the end of our conversation, he took me to see Peter in the Dean's office for a brief visit. I'll never forget my first exposure to Peter's wry and enigmatic, indeed inscrutable, smile, as I explained to him my enthusiasm for the legal system and legal professionals of the Kingdom of Prussia, a state that ceased to be a monarchy in 1918 and to exist at all in 1947. I left his office wondering whether his smile was one of amusement or bemusement, and it was only later that I learned that it was Peter's customary expression.

Once I arrived at CWRU in August of that year, Peter was quick and generous to provide me an adjunct appointment to the law faculty. But my primary experience of Peter was always less as Dean than as a friend and colleague, and specifically the two aspects of his life I want to emphasize here: his roles as father and churchman.

When Susan and I moved to Cleveland, we quickly decided to affiliate with Fairmount Presbyterian Church in Cleveland Heights, where Susan became friends with Ann,¹ bonding over parenting issues, as our children were nearly the same ages. Church committees, adult Christian education, and car-pool duties for Peter's Margaret and my Sarah were how I grew to admire Peter beyond his professional and intellectual merits, which others here address more ably than I. And I learned that his wry smile, tucked chin, open ear, and inquisitive curiosity were his approach to everybody he met—a gracious spirit that we all enjoyed and cherished.

Peter was above all a doting father. I grew to know him first as father of Mary and Margaret, and also of Matt. And Peter and Ann's commitment to family was unbounded in geography as in intensity. Fatherhood and family meant teamwork, and it was Peter who traveled with Matt to China to pursue Gracie's adoption, staying there to complete that side of the legal process and bringing her home so that she could join her sisters in wrapping their father around their little fingers. Peter teamed with Ann to model parental devotion to Mary, Margaret, and Gracie, and to share their joys and sorrows, triumphs and setbacks, and to cherish them always.

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1. Ann Gerhart, Peter's wife.—Eds.

And Peter often did so in the context of his devotion to church, modeling, for his girls, commitment to community and institution there. One sign of how much church meant to Peter and means to Ann is that Gracie is named for one of their great friends from Fairmount, a truly gracious and estimable person. One might think that after a successful term as Dean of a law school, as an active member of that herd of cats known as a law-school faculty, and with the satisfaction of scholarship as the alternative, Peter would not devote himself to leadership of an institution as dependent upon the unreliable labor of volunteers as a Presbyterian church. But he did, and with enthusiasm and success. For those of you unfamiliar with Presbyterianism, its sometimes-forbidding theology in practice takes second place to a church polity that refers every question of human existence—other than the salvation of one’s immortal soul—to some committee. At the top of the pyramid of congregational committees is the Session, consisting of ordained lay-people known as Elders. And working alongside the pastor of the church is the Clerk of Session, an Elder whose job is to satisfy this whole descending cascade of opinionated parishioners. Not only did Peter serve, successfully, as an Elder but also as Clerk, opening Fairmount to new forms of worship, committing it to the diversification of its congregation to reflect the changing demography of Cleveland Heights, and conducting himself always with his limitless patience, wry sense of humor, indeed amusement or bemusement or both.

Presbyterians make a big deal about their theology of stewardship, the belief that all human gifts are grants from God: “From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.”² Peter fulfilled this daunting calling, providing what was required and demanded and more, happily, and always with an enigmatic smile, a tucked chin, an inquisitive ear, as scholar and colleague, as friend, and as father and churchman.

2. *Luke* 12:48 (NRSV).