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Patris Mei Laudatio Ovatioque

John B. McKnight

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PATRIS MEI LAUDATIO OVATIOQUE

*John B. M^cKnight**

MUCH is written in these pages about the contribution that my father has made to the legal profession. These are kind words, and I know that he appreciates them. Most of the contributors to these pages are colleagues of my father and have been able to share their impressions of him as a professional, a scholar and a friend. I hope, however, that the reader will also have some interest in a somewhat different perspective on Professor M^cKnight, that of a son.

The reader will not be surprised to learn that I share with many of his colleagues the utmost love and respect for Joseph M^cKnight. He has always been caring and supportive without being overbearing. He taught the values of responsibility and hard work early, but these lessons were never delivered harshly. In fact, he is a man who sees an unusually great deal of humor in the circumstances that life delivers, and always tends to look on the bright side of a situation, no matter the odds. He is a man who embodies the virtues of having an open mind and an appreciation for different perspectives and cultures. No matter how developed his appreciation for the finest elements of culture, however, he is a Texan in the most fundamental sense. While I daresay many would not regard my father as a traditional Texan, I have always thought of him in that way. His *curriculum vitae* betrays his active participation in a number of organizations dedicated to Texas history and culture. More deeply, however, his life long research of Texas legal history reflects his fascination for Texas history and its European roots. My numerous childhood visits to countless Texas forts, monuments, churches and other historical landmarks further attests to his attachment to our native land. I believe many of his values and characteristics are representative of the traditional Texan.

With the passing of the years, I have come to appreciate that many of my father's traits were the result of his upbringing in West Texas and his experiences as a young man. These early experiences shaped his approach to life and to his career. As these events occurred well before the time that most of his colleagues became acquainted with him, it is my hope that by sharing them the reader will have a deeper understanding of how they shaped this very special man.

* John B. M^cKnight is the son of Joseph W. M^cKnight. He is a partner with the law firm of Locke Liddell & Sapp LLP, where he practices corporate and securities law, both domestically and on an international basis.

THE EARLY YEARS: WEST TEXAS DURING THE DEPRESSION YEARS

Joseph Webb M^cKnight was born in 1925 in San Angelo, Texas. He is a fourth generation Texan, a product of the M^cKnight family's westward migration across Texas. San Angelo is a medium-size town, full of friendly, hardworking people. San Angelo can also be described as dry, dusty and rather bleak, with unbearably long, hot summers.

Like many in West Texas, my Grandfather made a living in the cotton business. After the collapse of the cotton industry in West Texas, he turned to the wool business. He and my Grandmother had five children, of whom my father was the eldest. As a result of his seniority, my father learned responsibility and discipline at an early age. These lessons were administered with particular strictness in the wake of the Great Depression of 1929. The Great Depression had a devastating impact on West Texas and, while the M^cKnight family was not needy, the value of thriftiness was indelibly imprinted in my father. It was during these tough years that he learned the many ways in which a little more value can be rung from every penny. And as is so frequently the case in the transmission of values from father to son, he taught both my brother, Adair, and me from an early age the many virtues of frugality and thriftiness, for which I am belatedly grateful.

Even if you have spent only a little time with my father, you are bound to have noticed some manifestations of his thriftiness, including his uncanny ability to reuse seemingly disposable products. That which you might have thought spent is reincarnated yet again to perform a useful purpose. Not only is this habit intrinsically virtuous, but in our more modern times has taken on an environmentally friendly tone. Thus, while perhaps not intended, he is in his own way a forerunner of the modern environmental movement.

THE PROFOUND IMPACT OF THE RHODES SCHOLARSHIP

My father entered the University of Texas in 1941, but his studies were interrupted by World War II. After completing a tour of duty with the Navy in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, he returned to the University of Texas in 1946. During his final year at the University he was awarded a Rhodes Scholarship. This was quite an achievement for a boy from West Texas, and its impact on his life cannot be overstated.

My father entered Magdalen College at Oxford University in the fall of 1947, where he obtained the degrees of a Bachelor of Arts in Jurisprudence, a Bachelor of Civil Law and a Master of Arts. He has often described his years at Oxford as grueling, and I believe it was during these years that the discipline of hard work was firmly established as a life-long value. His work ethic has produced numerous scholarly works and, I am glad to report, continues to this day in spite of his advancing years. He can still be found at 7:00 a.m. in the family breakfast room working diligently on yet another manuscript!

The Oxford experience also, I think, produced in my father an open mind and an appreciation for different perspectives and cultures. While never at a loss for a strong opinion on virtually any subject, he is always solicitous of the views of others. He is willing to understand and respect the views of others, a characteristic that I am sure has endeared him to many of his students. This trait also extends to a deep interest in other cultures and, as a natural consequence, in foreign travel. Many summers during my childhood were spent living in Mexico or in Europe, where we would inevitably become immersed in the life of the local barrio. Not incidentally, these travels also provided access to many of the source materials in my father's continuing legal history research. To this day, he continues with his extended travels and research, living the professor's life to which he is so well suited.

PROFESSOR, PARENT AND FRIEND

My father has always been a fully dedicated law professor. While it is perhaps easier to objectively measure his scholastic productivity, there is no doubt in my mind that he is equally dedicated to educational excellence in the classroom. He deeply cares for the many students who have passed through the SMU School of Law, and is keenly interested in their education and the development of their careers. I remember from a very early age law students being welcomed guests in our home. They still are, and many former students remain close friends and colleagues. I know that my father treasures these relationships every bit as much as his love for SMU and scholarly pursuits.

My father has also been a wonderful parent and friend. This was not always an easy task, especially during the years following my mother's death when he served the roles of both father and mother to my brother and to me. He provided a gentle, guiding hand through our years of adolescence, and somehow managed to let us think that our decisions were made independently. Yet he was always subtly guiding us to the right decisions, making sure that we avoided the worst mistakes. He has been a source of great support and understanding through the years, for which we are both deeply grateful.

I would be remiss if I did not take note of a trait that we most enjoy in our friends, the ability to make one laugh. With the passing of the years, I think my father's sense of humor has actually grown, for I do not remember thinking him very funny in my youth (alternatively, it may simply be that my appreciation for humor has developed over time). I am not sure where he picked up this heightened sense of humor, but my best guess is that my stepmother, Mimi M^cKnight, has given him this gift. She has an especially dry sense of humor, and I suspect that he has had no choice but to learn to play the game. In any case, he seems to find humor in whatever circumstances he finds himself, and there are few people with whom I share more laughter.

I have a great deal of love and respect for my father. While in my youth he was a proven disciplinarian and advocate of hard work, with the passage of time his appreciation for the humor that life delivers has grown. He can still be cantankerous one minute and laughing the next. Professor Gail Daly, Associate Dean for Library and Technology of the Underwood Law Library, may best have described my father when she characterized him as a “kind-hearted curmudgeon.” I look forward to many more years of laughing with the old curmudgeon, and invite you to share those laughs with us.

Articles in Tribute

