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All I Really Need to Know I Learned from Von Creel

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ALL I REALLY NEED TO KNOW I LEARNED FROM VON CREEL¹

Andrew C. Spiropoulos*

As winter follows fall or summer spring, life on a university faculty follows a pattern as predictable as the change of the seasons. If one is lucky to be associated with a university (or, in this case, a law school) where the incumbent faculty seeks to improve the school by hiring the best people available even if that means hiring people with different interests and backgrounds than their own (in other words, if your school is fortunate enough to be led by people of the character of Von Creel), you soon discern the fascinating rhythm of faculty change. Senior faculty pledge to hire “the best and brightest” and do so with some success. These newbies, puffed up by their sterling credentials and fancy new gig, arrive on campus and, as they are exposed to their new colleagues and the operation of the school, wonder how they ended up at an institution run by such idiots. It often seems to new faculty that the longer a colleague’s tenure, the less he or she knows. We are redeemed only because, as possessors of one of the best jobs devised by the mind of man, professors tend to hang around for a long time and, thus, in no time at all, are treated just the same by the colleagues that follow them.

If you have a bit of sense, long before you are treated as brain-dead by the newest kid on the block, you realize that many of your senior colleagues are not just better than useless—they are finer academics and people than you’ll likely ever be. We should not be surprised by this fact; these people, after all, built the institution you should be grateful to inherit.

At a law school that has been blessed by the presence of many

1. With apologies to Robert Fulghum and the majority of readers who hate silly puns.

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wonderful people, no one better demonstrates what it means to succeed as a law professor and as a human being than Von Creel. I have found, however, that it is easier to grasp this reality if one has passed through the faculty circle of life.² Every new professor arrives on campus bursting with new ideas and teaching methods that will dazzle our students and enlighten them in unprecedented ways. We also arrive believing that the brilliance of our scholarship will change the way the profession thinks about, well, everything. Once, undoubtedly, our various works of genius have been recognized and given their proper place in the legal ring of honor, people with influence and power will seek us out to tap into our vast learning and benefit from our sage advice.

Because, of course, it takes some time for both our gifts and the world's appreciation of them to ripen, we are forced to seek the effusive praise we crave from our colleagues. (Well, we know that they actually won't praise us, but we'll settle for grudging acknowledgement of our excellence.) This campaign to establish our place in the pecking order is exhausting. We must be certain that no faculty workshop goes by, no matter the subject, without our voice being heard. We must angle for leadership slots on various national or, better yet, international committees—making sure, of course, that our press people let everyone know about our new distinction. We must, in casual conversation, drop references about which journals have accepted our latest article and which law schools have invited us to present a paper. Everyone must understand that we are much in demand.

And then there's Von Creel. Local guy, here all his life, by choice no less. A quiet man, and that all too rare breed, a true gentleman. When you run into Von in the hall, you're not going to hear about his latest intellectual exploit, but you will have a good conversation, if you would like, about Oklahoma football or the latest political campaign rumors. (Only later will you discover that no one on the faculty follows more closely, or understands more, about what is going on in the federal courts than Von.) Von doesn't waste time showing off at faculty meetings or anywhere else—he tends to his business and goes home to his family. Solid, reliable, a bulwark of the old regime, but nothing remarkable.

But soon, if you pay attention, the truth reveals itself. You talk to students, and they may like your class fine, but the teacher they always

2. Yes, I got that from *The Lion King*.

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want to talk about is Von Creel. Year after year, you go to graduation ceremonies, student events, and alumni gatherings, where the students, current and former, with gratitude and a kind of awe, talk about how, starting on the first day of class, Von changed their lives and showed them what it really means to be a lawyer. You take pride in knocking out your articles, but then you find out that, while you were out presenting a paper on a subject about which few care, Von has been writing books, ones that actual human beings buy at the bookstore and read. You think you're hot stuff because a legislator gave you a call, but then you discover that, in addition to clerking for Judge Murrah, Von was executive assistant to Governor David Boren. Finally, if you were lucky enough to spend any time with Von and Mary, you witnessed a great marriage, one that showed you that love does indeed triumph over adversity and loss.

What's Von's secret? What does he know that the rest of us tend to neglect? As I thought about Von and Mary, and how much love they shared, it occurred to me that the key to understanding Von was staring us in the face all along—it is love. Nothing, of course, compares to Von's love for his wife, children, and grandchildren, but love is the thread that runs through—and binds—all of the parts of Von's life. Von loves the law and wants to pass on that love to others. He truly loves and cares for his students, as great teachers always do. He loves, and is grateful for, the privilege of life as a professor, which provides a fortunate few the resources and time to think, read, and write about subjects that interest them. He loves our state and our university, not simply because they are our own, but because they are uncommonly full of decent and caring people who do their best to create a good life for those in their charge. It is Von's love for all the parts of his life that enables him to achieve with humility and suffer trouble and loss with serenity and hope. When you love who you are and what you do, it's a lot easier to both do well and do good.

We now face a prospect few had imagined possible—an OCU without Von Creel. We hope, of course, that Von will continue to teach and be a presence at the law school for a good long time. But even if Von has other plans in store, what he bequeathed to us will not be lost and his influence, at least within our lifetimes, will not wane. What I most hope for us is that we follow his example of love for our institution and profession so that, when it is our turn to step aside, we can pass on to the next generation what Von gave to us.