

University of South Dakota School of Law

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A Tribute to John (John Hagemann Memorial Service 19 December 2009)

Frank Pommersheim, *University of South Dakota School of Law*



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A Tribute to John
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The essence of friendship is a certain kind of ease and a special kind of thoughtfulness. I felt both of these elements most deeply in my long friendship with John. While John and I were quite different in many respects, I always felt a special ease around him. It was likely that our mutual passion for books was the foundation of our lasting friendship.

As I recently looked around my office, I saw again that long row of books John had given me over the years: *The Collected Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, *The Selected Stories of Peter Taylor*, *A Year with Thomas Merton*, *A Year in Poetry*, *Spoon River Anthology*, *Benedict's Way*, *The Collected Poems of Phil Rizzuto*, yes Phil Rizzuto. And many, many others, but I see them a little differently now. Not just books but gifts of part of John to parts of me. Indeed, they bridged our souls. From two, a certain kind of one.

The examples of John's thoughtfulness to me are many but I'll just mention a few. Early in my career here at the Law School, I received a card from the Native American Rights Fund, in Boulder, CO. that said a generous contribution had been made to NARF in my name by John Hagemann. I went to John. He said simply, "I appreciate the work you are doing here at the Law School and wanted to acknowledge that fact." No more was ever said.

When I published *Snaps*, my first book of poetry in 1994, John asked if he could introduce me at my first poetry reading here at the Law School. I was honored. His introduction was very kind, gracious, and generous. He acknowledged our friendship as "one of the treasures of his life" and quoted from a book I had given him, James Welch's novel *The Indian Lawyer*, the part about a basketball player standing alone on an outdoor court, "going one on one against the only man to even beat him." Several years ago, John sent me a postcard from City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, "Frank, I'm in the poetry room reading Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and I'm thinking of you!" I still have that postcard.

Most recently – in fact only a week or so ago on Thursday, December 10th –John had Mike Roche and I over for lunch at that sweet little house at 715 E. National that he shared with his loving partner, Virginia Koster. The warmth and good cheer were quite extraordinary. Virginia – incidental to cooking for students—prepared an exquisite beef stew. I think the water in our glasses changed to wine!

John radiated a lively contentment. He commented—presciently as it turned out—that the key to a meaningful retirement was not in retiring *from* something, but rather in retiring *to* something. And it was quite clear that John had retired in large part to nurture his extensive web of friendships both in and outside of his extended family, but especially with his daughter, Gretchen, and his grandchildren. And all of this was anchored right there at that little house at 715 E. National with the love of his life, sweet Virginia Koster.

Michael and I left with the warmest of glows. Yet in the world's indifference and hardness, John died in his sleep three days later. That final meal with John will always be a special blessing for Michael and I.

O John, O John where have you gone:

Poetry, friendship
the long road....

Pax vobiscum,
peace be with you

This day
and all days

My most
dear one.

From a dear friend,
Frank Pommersheim