

These remarks were presented at a Memorial Celebration for Richard Stern in Bond Chapel, at the University of Chicago, on November 8th, 2013.

Memories of Richard Stern

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It is one of the great good fortunes of my life that I was able to count Dick as a friend for almost 40 years. I first met him shortly after I arrived at the University in 1975 as a new assistant professor in the Philosophy Department. I moved to California in 1999, but the friendship continued at a distance after that.

I am going to call up a few scattered memories.

The world always seemed just a bit brighter when I was with Dick. It was brighter, for example, one Saturday morning some 25 years ago when we went to look for a used car. In those days, Dick always drove clunkers that seemed just about to die. And when they did die, he would go out and buy another clunker just as bad as the one before. That morning he was, once again, looking for a new old car. He had checked the used car ads in the newspaper, circled a few possibilities, and now we were going in my car to look at them.

The first address was somewhere in the middle of the South Side ghetto. It was a nice block. The houses were well maintained. But it was a part of Chicago I rarely saw. Dick knocked on the door and the owner, an old timer, came out to show us the car. It looked pretty good to me – maybe too good. Dick didn't seem interested. But he struck up a conversation with the man and that is what brightened the day. Dick asked him a few questions and soon they were talking about the South Side, about Chicago and New York, about how things had changed and not changed, and about their lives. After a while, the man invited us into his house and we spent the rest of the morning at his kitchen table, drinking coffee and talking. (They were talking, at least. I mostly just listened.) What I remember is that Dick was so perfectly at ease, so unmistakably interested in what the man was telling us, and so given to

laughter, that the man just, somehow, opened up. He had had a fantastically difficult and rich life and we got to hear about it.

I often had experiences like that with Dick. He talked and joked easily with strangers and enjoyed doing so. I had the sense that he felt himself surrounded by wonderful, interesting people every time he walked down the street.

Dick and I often played tennis. We didn't play all that well, but we had a good time. He could usually beat me fair and square. But if all else failed, he would find some way to make me laugh. I was particularly vulnerable when serving. I would concentrate – because I knew what was coming – but it didn't seem to matter. On one occasion, I remember, I tossed the ball for my first serve, began my stroke, and then Dick yelled 'ARTUR SCHNABEL.' That was enough. I collapsed. And when I finally pulled myself together sufficiently to attempt a second serve, he did it again. Dick waited for just the right moment and then yelled 'WILLIE FIXED IT.' I am not sure that I managed to hit the ball at all.

So let me tell you about Artur Schnabel and about Willie fixing it. When Dick was growing up, he lived on 84th Street and Central Park West in New York. Any number of famous people lived in the neighborhood, among them the great Austrian pianist. (Another was Joe DiMaggio, who lived just across the street.) Mr. Schnabel could often be seen walking on Dick's block, and on one occasion when Dick was very young, someone – maybe his mother – pointed to Mr. Schnabel and said 'THAT MAN PLAYS THE PIANO.' As the story goes, on the very next occasion when Dick saw him, he went up to Mr. Schnabel and said 'WE HAVE A PIANO AND YOU CAN PLAY IT ANY TIME YOU WANT.' Mr. Schnabel thanked him with great dignity for the generous offer, but then went on to explain that he had a piano of his own.

Willie was a neighborhood character who was a fixture of life on Ridgwood Court, where Dick and Alane lived. He would regularly come to their door and ask if they had any odd jobs for him to do. If they didn't, then he might just ask for a ... small loan ... to tide him over. Willie was a handyman, but was not always as handy as one might have liked. On one memorable occasion, he came to the door and Dick asked him if he could fix a defective socket in a kitchen

light fixture. Willie said 'SURE' and went right to work with a screwdriver and a metal coat hanger. An hour later, all the lights in the house were out; loose, unconnected wires were dangling from an open circuit breaker box; and Willie had to leave because he was late for another job.

So that is how Dick made me double fault that time. He yelled 'ARTUR SCHNABEL' on my first serve, and yelled 'WILLIE FIXED IT' on my second. He often resorted to such underhanded behavior. That is why I consider it only fair that an asterisk be attached in the record book to quite a few of his victories.

I have a special memory associated with something that Dick once wrote. I am not thinking of one of his novels or stories, or one of his critical essays or autobiographical works. Rather it is the statement he read to a special meeting of the Faculty Senate in April of 1986. I was present at the meeting – as were other people here today – and remember it as one of Dicks fine moments.

The purpose of the meeting was to discuss and vote on a resolution to urge the trustees to divest the University of holdings in corporations and banks doing significant business in South Africa. Several hundred faculty were present. The resolution was introduced in response to a call by anti-apartheid leaders in South Africa, including Bishop Desmond Tutu.

Dick was one of the people who spoke that day in favor of the divestment resolution. I remember thinking at the time that his statement was different in tone from most of the others and, perhaps for that reason, more effective. It was personal and passionate. It was not cast as an argument for why all universities should divest. Rather it was appeal for this one university to do so – this university that meant so much to him and where he had spent so much of his life.

It would take too long to read the entire statement, but I would like to read a passage that conveys its tone. It comes near the end of the statement. I am now quoting.

Finally, I support this resolution because this university, which I love, not only occupies a sacred precinct in time, but in space. Its

position is in a city a majority of whose citizens, by the fact of their skin color and parentage, would suffer immediate degradation were they to find themselves in South Africa. To offer high-minded and prudential reasons against the resolution, would, therefore, seem to me to constitute not only a rationalization of my own disposition to accept a *status quo* in which I have been exceptionally comfortable, but an open insult to my university's neighbors, to this city, and indeed to those members of the University who would endure a like degradation.

I saw Dick for the last time in January, just a few days before he died. He was then sleeping most of the time. But there were periods when he was awake and alert, and then the three of us were together. I sat in a chair close to his bed. Alane lay on the bed next to Dick, stroking his arm and anticipating his every need. Dick was too weak to change his position, or hold a glass of water, or do much of anything without Alane's assistance. His speech was limited to 'yes' and 'no' and a few other isolated words in a barely audible voice. But he was certainly there with us, and seemed to enjoy hearing some of our old stories and some new ones. He often broke out in a big smile.

And the stories did come. I asked Alane to tell about the time when she was sitting in their hotel room in Paris, the phone rang, and it was ... Sam Beckett! But he was perfectly lovely and unassuming; it was not at all difficult to talk with him. I called up a few tennis tales. The story of Willie's handiwork with the light fixture was one of them. At one point, Alane asked if she should tell one of their favorite old terrible jokes – one about the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Dick's face lit up and, with new found strength, he said 'No. No.' But I insisted.

Even under those terribly sad circumstances, I felt comfortable with Dick and Alane as I do with few other people. There were moments when I could almost imagine that we were back in the house on Ridgwood Court where, in their company, I had spent so many happy hours. That house became a second home for me during my years in Hyde Park. I always felt welcome and accepted there. It was a place where I could talk about any subject, no matter how personal or painful.

So that is my final image of Dick – lying on the bed, cradled in Alane’s love and care, close to death, but with a big, unguarded, luminous smile on his face. Dick was a great man and a great friend. I miss him.