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Judge

J. Peter Byrne

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JUDGE

*J. Peter Byrne**

Becoming Judge Coffin's law clerk must be the most fortunate of conclusions to a legal education. His judicial craftsmanship sets a standard for thoughtful professionalism that a young lawyer can never outgrow. In those salt-scented and book-lined chambers, briefs were painstakingly and critically read, precedents and statutes honestly interpreted and challenged to yield just results, opinions written and rewritten to convey the significance of a small distinction or the applicability of a large principle.

The Judge's clerks learn these virtues not just from observation but also from participation. No other professional role approximates the heady blend of tutelage, partnership, adoption, and public responsibility that comes to his law clerks. You are startled to find yourself seated cross-legged in a massive lumpy leather chair arguing hammer and tongs about constitutional restraints on the grand jury (a subject that had never crossed your mind until the previous week) with the finest appellate judge in the nation, who not only tolerates your presumption but draws you out, gently draws your attention to the flaws in your thinking, wins your heartfelt agreement to his proposed solution, and dismisses you with thanks and commendation echoing in your ears. Judge Coffin, who has been the kindest of judges in print to law clerks, in his *The Ways of A Judge*, compared the judge-clerk interaction to that between a master and his apprentices in a Renaissance art studio. But only the most exceptional *maestro* would nurture his apprentices with the affection and frank interest we were given. One afternoon, each of the three clerks was working in chambers on a different case raising an absorbing constitutional question, while Judge was buried in his office working on a pair of ponderous marine insurance cases which he had kept entirely for himself because of our total ignorance of that worthy subject; the irony of this division of labor elicited from him only good-natured wisecracks about reducing our salaries.

The distinguishing mark of Judge Coffin's judicial work also sets him apart personally from hundreds of competent and dedicated lawyers and public servants: the creative and sympathetic presence of full and rounded humanity. It is no incidental that his superb book about the federal judiciary captures through personal observation the human dilemmas and opportunities before any judge, whether the subtle support and constraint of collegiality or the moments of solitude with unsettled questions where the judge must give an answer aided only by inadequate precedents and contradic-

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tory theories. Judge Coffin's clerks learned in a thousand ways that the litigants, lawyers, and judges themselves were real people affected by or responsible for the administration of justice.

But if Judge Coffin invigorated our understanding of the law by drawing the connection between the judicial process and the lives actually lived around us, he stirred the souls of many clerks through his example of professional attainment and public service harmonized with personal creativity, family affection, and pervasive good humor. In a world where many lawyers are one-dimensional drones flattened by the relentless pursuit of "success," with more billable than waking hours, here is a man with the most varied and successful legal career, who withal carves statutes, paints pictures, loves his family, is loved by them, writes verse, makes prints, writes books, attends church, puns, keeps a boat and a summer house, belongs to clubs, suffers practical jokes, retaliates, and exchanges quips with the Senate Majority leader and with the courthouse janitor. Moreover, these manifold active talents and commitments flourish in graceful balance, easing any hard distinction between home and chambers, play and work, family and clerks. Clerking for Judge Coffin at the outset of my career profoundly enriched and qualified my ambitions, and suggested possibilities for fulfillment where before had been callow ambition and fears of withering.

Judge Coffin's easy harmony between judicial excellence and flowing humanity is captured by the casual honor with which he bears the title, "Judge." He signs letters to his clerks simply, "Judge"; letters from him and his wonderful wife come "Judge and Ruth." He remains a judge when he is a teasing friend or heartwarming printmaker; he remains a knowing and creative person when he decides an appeal. Thus, in calling him "Judge" we acknowledge the significance of his office and responsibility, while claiming the familiar affection of a nickname. We do not cease respecting when we love him.