"Uncle Bob": Introductory Remarks to the Inaugural Robert F. Boden Lecture (Speech)

Charles C. Clausen
"UNCLE BOB": INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO THE INAUGURAL ROBERT F. BODEN LECTURE*

CHARLES D. CLAUSEN**

I felt honored last week when Dean Howard Eisenberg asked me to reminisce for a few minutes this afternoon about the man for whom this lecture series is named, Robert F. Boden. I was honored to be an opener for Professor Daniel Mandelker’s main event, and to play a supporting role in this inaugural Boden Lecture. Secondly, and more personally, I was honored to be asked to share some thoughts about a man who was so important to Marquette University Law School and to me personally. So when Howard asked, I immediately said “yes.”

Saying “yes” was the easy part. As this date and event approached, I had to deal with the problem of what to say about this remarkable man who led the law school for more than seventeen years. To me and to a decreasing handful of veteran faculty members at the Law School, Bob Boden was a flesh and bones friend, co-worker, teacher, and leader. To those who came to the law school after 1984, when he died at age 55, he is the discarnate former dean after whom the Boden Courtroom, the Boden Chair, and now the Boden Lectures are named.

I have chosen not to speak about the accomplishments of Dean Boden mentioned in the printed invitation to this inaugural lecture:

- The growth in the size of the law school faculty and administration under his leadership
- The expansion of the physical plant
- The growth in the law library’s collection.
- His many writings on law, the legal profession and legal ethics.¹

As impressive and significant as his accomplishments were in terms of bricks and mortar, faculty size and strength, volumes in the library

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1. For those who want to learn about these matters or refresh their memories about them, see John J. Kircher, Dean Robert F. Boden: A Retrospective, 67 MARQ. L. REV. xi (1984).
and in terms of his own scholarly and always elegant writings, I do not believe that those achievements explain why we are here this afternoon, thirteen years after his death, honoring his memory.

It was rather, I think, attributes of his heart and soul—his character—that cause us who knew him and worked with him at the law school to hold the memory of him so dear and to recall him this afternoon.

Bob Boden was a born teacher. Regardless of the role he was in—professor, dean, writer, law reformer, advocate, counselor—Bob was a teacher.

So, I devote these few minutes to speaking about what Bob Boden taught his students and his faculty not about Law, but about Life—what he taught us, not by lecture, article, or book, but by living example.

Bob Boden taught us compassion and generosity and service of others, and he taught gently and by example. He taught us pride in our profession, and he taught gently and by example. He taught us, gently and by example, about humility and the value of a sense of humor. And he taught us, always gently and always by example, that these virtues can be united and can co-exist in a person with power and prestige and high status, even in a lawyer, even in a law professor, even in a university dean.

Dean Boden had three nicknames. All of them were affectionate, two of them were humorous and one was the most revealing. He was called “Dean Bodeen,” a simple rhyming play on his name and title. He was called “Dean the Dream,” after the Marquette basketball star Dean Meminger. And he was called “Uncle Bob.” Uncle Bob. What a wonderful nickname. It suggested family, affection, approachability, and a caring relationship. It was a perfect nickname for Bob Boden.

When law students had serious troubles with grades, or with finances, or with other personal problems, they usually ended up in the Dean’s office—not always seeking but always receiving help. Sometimes the help was money, sometimes from his own pocket. Sometimes the help was becoming one of the legion of Dean Boden’s last-semester-of-law-school research assistants who needed a couple of credits with a high grade in order to graduate with their classmates. Always the help included patient listening, caring, and compassionate counseling. He was the same way with faculty members, who were experiencing hard times: death of loved ones, serious illnesses, divorce, all the various kinds of heartaches that Life brings to people over many years. We will never know how many people over his seventeen years as Dean sat in his office needing help of some kind—and getting it. He would not talk
about it; he was a great respecter of confidences. We know about it from the people he helped. I hear such stories to this day, talking to alumni. Uncle Bob.

Bob taught us pride in our chosen profession. He was an academic through and through, but he was a lawyer first and last. He described the law school as the teaching arm of the legal profession and he saw professional education as different in kind from other university education. He liked lawyers and lawyers liked him. He believed in lawyers as trustworthy counselors, social facilitators, protectors of human dignity, and justice seekers and peacemakers. To the extent that lawyers were like that, they were like him—a good lawyer and a good person. If they were not, he would tell you they betrayed a public trust.

When a young faculty member named Janine Geske (now Justice Geske), came to him in 1979 and said she wanted to open a law clinic for elderly citizens in the downtown area, sponsored by the law school and the Roman Catholic Church’s Gesu parish, he supported her strongly, despite some vocal opposition in different quarters. For years, that clinic provided help to our neighbors, many of whom had nowhere else to turn, while at the same time providing professional education to our students that could not be replicated in the classroom. He believed that what our faculty and students did in that clinic represented the legal profession at its best, not simply as a learned profession but as a helping profession.

He had no use for lawyer jokes, or for lawyers whose behavior would give rise to lawyer jokes. He was a dignified, high-minded, and public spirited attorney at law, as well as a professor of law and dean.

On the other hand, he taught us by his example about humility and being able to laugh at yourself. As proud as he was to be a lawyer, a professor, a dean, an Irishman, a Catholic, a part of Marquette family, he was personally humble. He referred to himself as “Uncle Bob.” He poked fun at himself. When I first came to the law school thirty years ago, the school had its own full time maintenance and custodial worker, called in those politically less sensitive days a janitor. At the law school, we enjoyed the services of a janitor named Ed, who was referred to as Ed the Janitor. Ed looked surprisingly like Dean Boden: same height, same build, similar facial features, even a similar distinctive manner of walking. The Dean delighted in the rumor that he and Ed the Janitor were brothers, and that Ed got him the job as dean. He delighted even more in relating the rumor that every year they switched jobs. (Of course, there were some times when he would have loved to have switched jobs with Ed, at least for a while.) He taught us not to take
ourselves, regardless of title or position, too seriously.

In The Education of Henry Adams, Adams wrote: "A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops." Thirteen years post-mortem is hardly eternity, but it is a nice start. And, after all, this is only the Inaugural Boden Lecture. Adams also wrote: "A friend in power is a friend lost." Bob Boden's life proved that, at least for those with capacious souls, power and real friendship can co-exist.

That is my thumbnail sketch and reminiscence about Robert F. Boden. To know him was to like him, and thousands did. To know him well was to love him. I do not know how many loved him and miss him to this day. There are a great many. I am blessed to be one of them.

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3. Id. at 417.