

TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR COKER*

CHARACTERISTICALLY, class would begin with a discussion of beguiling simplicity about the latest doings of the hypothetical Coker Pencil Corporation. Then, under the pressure of a series of verbal and physical gestures—swift, fitful, and with a peculiarly discursive intensity—the bemused student would become aware that the disarmingly simple question was not susceptible of the obvious answer. The hornbook statement or facile generalization would invariably call forth a series of questions with a running commentary, accompanied by a verbal or blackboard schematization of the increasingly convoluted course of scrutiny which Professor Coker often characterized as “brackets within brackets.” The questions rarely led to “answers”—and the dialogue never drew to a close. For it ultimately engaged one’s total intellectual and ethical faculties in an unending colloquy in a world where conclusionary terms and slipshod analysis mask evasion and error. It is as the teacher who was nonpareil in the art of engaging the individual in an endless dialogue that his students will remember Professor Coker.

It is a truism that the lawyer learns a way of thinking rather than a series of rules, a method of analysis rather than a set of answers. Sooner or later and in varying degrees, the law student learns that truth lurks behind this familiar cliché. Perhaps any series of circumstances—or just the normal course of legal training eventually instills some part of this truth. But anyone who sat at Professor Coker’s feet for a semester could not but feel himself the recipient of a unique blend of perception, skill, dedication, and delight. No one rose from his class without a sense of distress at the inadequacy of words and classifications and rules to solve even the most common problem; but also, no one left his classes without a sense of conviction that the attempt to articulate and assess infinitely refined considerations was far better than the empty verbal response—and that given such a complex awareness one could live in peace with conclusions only if one could in full candor confess their tentativeness. Such was the intellectual honesty, analytical prowess, and ethical dedication which Professor Coker bestowed on his students. With all the gift of pedagogy that Professor Coker possessed went a warmth, a spirited cheeriness, a tolerance, and an unsparing generosity of self that made students flock to him and gave his teaching the peculiar imprint of his person.

“Be my guest” was a classic Cokerism. We are that, even now.

*This Tribute is written by the Editors of the *Journal*.