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John Edward Kennedy

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John Kennedy

Others who write to honor John Kennedy will convey his characteristics and accomplishments. My comments will be limited to a single encounter that I had with John Kennedy in the spring of 1969, when he was a young faculty member at the law school, and I was a third year student.

In 1969, my senior year at the law school, I received an offer to practice law with a huge, old-line, Wall Street law firm. That offer generated many of the normal reactions that one would imagine. I was flattered and proud to receive such an offer. At the same time, I was a little scared to think about joining a firm with nearly as many lawyers as the entire population of my home town.

Other, perhaps less typical factors were also important in considering that offer. It is the grossest of understatements to say that I had not anticipated practicing on Wall Street. Instead, I had always intended to return to Eastern Kentucky to practice in a small town.

And, of course, there were the times. The late 1960's was a difficult period for students. Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were both assassinated. The Vietnam War, which was raging, created moral and personal dilemmas for many of us, especially those with unfulfilled military obligations. The establishment was under siege, and many thought there was a legitimate basis for the assault.

Given those kinds of times and my rural, Eastern Kentucky background, an offer to join a Wall Street firm was difficult to deal with. Certainly, I believed in (and still do) the capitalistic system, its freedom and opportunities, and was (and am) convinced that it generates levels of production that are unmatched by any other economic system. Still, there was this gnawing apprehension. Should I take such an "establishment" job?

It was about that time that I had to see John Kennedy concerning a problem on the *Kentucky Law Journal* (John was our faculty advisor). When we finished, he asked about my plans for the next year. I told him about my offer and, without much explanation, told John that I was not at all sure I would accept it.

At that point, John, whom I really did not know all that well and who had something of a deserved reputation for shyness,

conveyed to me in clear terms that I should go to Wall Street. I listened while he went through the normal reasons for accepting the offer. I then opened up to John just a bit, hinting in an oblique fashion about some of my thoughts, thoughts that were so very personal and so much a product of the times and my background.

Immediately, John knew what the real issues were, but he stood his ground while shifting his argument. "What you should really do," he said, "is go to Wall Street for a few years and then go work with the vineyard workers in California." I told him I probably did not need the latter experience since I had grown up in Eastern Kentucky during the 1950's and 1960's. He smiled, and he understood what I was saying. I also understood what he meant.

This brief encounter with John Kennedy twenty years ago obviously was important to me. John believed in and conveyed to me the idea that rich and diverse life experiences are essential to all of us. We must not allow ourselves to live in narrow worlds where we see only people with the same views, achievements, and aspirations as ours. John also believed and, of course, was telling me that one is not required to shed one's own moral and political views or one's own life experiences when entering new worlds. Indeed, at such times it is even more important to retain one's own values.

These were essential notions to my dealing with what was going on in 1969. Obviously, the validity of these ideas has not diminished with time.

Years later when we became better friends, I asked John if he remembered that conversation. He said he did not, but then he laughed and added, "It sounds like something I would say."

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