

# MASTER TEACHER REMEMBERED

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We lost a gifted teacher when Larry King died on April 1. Many constituencies rightfully can claim this loss, including New York University School of Law, where he was the Charles Seligson Professor of Law and where he taught for forty years (he called it the “Law School”); and the world’s legal community: courts, practitioners, and scholars that regularly relied on his clear, practical writings such as the authoritative *Collier* bankruptcy treatise.

Others can tell you about Larry’s intellectual distinction. He was our undisputed bankruptcy guru. As a student in three of his law school courses, however, I want to describe Larry, the master teacher. He was the model of teaching excellence.

Larry entered my life when I was an unfocused law student in the mid-sixties. Other faculty members had failed to engage me. Then Larry came along, teaching Secured Transactions, a course often dreaded by students when taught by others. But Larry was direct, clear, and unpretentious. Most importantly, he was supremely likable. His easy teaching style was unforgettable: walking around the classroom with his tie loosened, engaging us in a mutual learning dialogue. There was no prancing, preening, or pandering. He created an atmosphere of shared responsibility with students, based on his gentle, sincere manner. There was no particular rule or teaching method. To Larry, we were partners in the learning process. He was not only able to inspire and engage us but also to get our best performance. We did not want to fail our favorite teacher.

Attending Larry’s class was like sitting at a bar with one of your best friends and asking him to explain a secured transaction. Larry’s casual, understated, concrete description of something as mundane as a purchase money security interest was elegantly simple. “The bank loans you the money to buy a car; in return, you give it the right to repossess the car if you fail to repay the loan.” I still treasure my class notes from Larry’s three courses. Almost thirty-five years later, they are still a wonderful reference tool.

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Larry was full of practical wisdom. He told us, for example, how to deal effectively with a court clerk: "Pretend you're the clerk, and he is the smart lawyer."

I never talked with Larry until I graduated from law school. Before then, I knew that we would be friends if I ever got to know him, something that seemed unlikely. After all, we students viewed law professors as demigods. And Larry was the rising star of American bankruptcy law.

I met Larry again shortly after graduation. I had applied for a business law teaching position at the City University of New York, and a faculty reference was essential. On my nervous visit to his office with the reference request, Larry immediately put me at ease. He asked about my grades, and then told me not to worry. His gracious letter (which I only saw two years later) landed me the job.

I still never got to know Larry, the man, for another five years, when I was the associate of his mentor, Charles Seligson, a member of the Law School faculty. Because of pressing professional obligations, Seligson was unable to teach a few of his creditors' rights and bankruptcy classes, and had asked me to fill in for him. He then introduced me to his colleague, Larry. Larry could not have been more gracious to this twenty-eight-year-old lawyer. When Seligson died in 1975, Larry helped arrange my joining the adjunct faculty. He graciously offered his office for my class preparation, enabling me to concentrate effectively. He would quietly leave when I arrived, after chatting and filling me with confidence. Even when he was not physically present in the office, he inspired me to make my best effort in the classroom.

Larry occasionally was responsible for the periodic in-class evaluation of my teaching performance over the past twenty-six years. I never told him that his presence always terrified me in a positive way, causing days of advance preparation. There was no way I would ever disappoint my favorite teacher with a lack of effort and preparation.

And Larry himself always was prepared. He made teaching look easy. He never read from a script or even an outline. He made you feel, even in a class of 150 students, that he was talking directly to you.

Larry seemed unflappable. Over a period of thirty-five years, I saw him mildly annoyed only once, when a fellow panelist on a continuing legal education panel had failed to prepare. The fellow simply blathered. Although Larry said nothing about it during the program, he told me how disappointed he was with this fellow's performance on the trip home. For Larry, teaching required an intense commitment.

Larry's office at the Law School also told you much about the man. On his desk was a leather notepad, inscribed as follows: "To

teach is to learn twice.” Pictures of other gifted teachers—the late Vern Countryman of Harvard, Frank Kennedy of Michigan, and David Epstein of Alabama—covered his walls. In these pictures of other teachers you could see Larry with his sleeves rolled up, ready for work. He was not only teaching law students, but also practitioners of every stripe—single practitioners, government lawyers, and the rest of us. Over the years, Larry even conducted small seminars for the staff of Matthew Bender, the publisher of *Collier on Bankruptcy*. Make no mistake: Larry never charged or received a cent for all of his extracurricular teaching. He knew, as we all knew, that he was put on this earth to teach.

Waves of plaques, inscribed whiskey glasses, and thank-you notes regularly flooded Larry’s office. In the past twenty-six years, I have seen notes from Chief Justices, judges, practitioners, bar associations, faculty colleagues, and students, all expressing their deep appreciation for his help. He never stopped sharing his learning.

Larry did not take himself too seriously, either. He was born January 16, 1929, and on his office wall was a brief news clip describing January 16 as “National Nothing Day.” In fact, Larry was a man of true substance, as so many others have already acknowledged over the past forty years.

Larry ended his career with a remarkable performance at the Supreme Court of the United States on March 30, 2001, just hours before he died. He gave the keynote address at the induction ceremony for the American College of Bankruptcy. He must have known that this would be his last class. He talked about the importance of public service. Responding to the suggestion that “lawyers and judges [get] into the classrooms around the country,”<sup>1</sup> Larry did not think that this was a good idea:

I do not believe you can pick someone out of his or her office or from the bench and say here, teach, even if that individual has volunteered with enthusiasm to do so. Not everyone can be an effective teacher. It takes a good deal more than merely standing in [front] of a group and talking.<sup>2</sup>

Larry had proved this point for more than forty years.

Larry concluded his life’s work with grace, urging a distinguished group of judges, lawyers, and law professors to contribute something:

Share your expertise by writing sensible articles. The key word is sensible. Participate in bar association functions; be active, volun-

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence P. King, Address at the American College of Bankruptcy Induction Ceremony (Mar. 30, 2001), at <http://www.amercol.org/kingspch.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Id.

teer to do work. Get involved in pro bono work. You will get a lot of satisfaction in helping people. In whatever form you wish to express yourself, remember, give something back.<sup>3</sup>

Larry thus described his life as he lived it. His gentle manner, generosity and wisdom will stick with me to the end. He was not only a wonderfully gifted teacher and mentor, but also a friend. Above all else, he was a mensch.

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<sup>3</sup> Id.