

## *Deeds, Not Creeds*

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*John Loeb Memorial Service*

*January 16, 1997*

I MET JOHN LOEB, for the first time, barely six years ago. I knew only the smallest fraction of all that he was, and all that he had achieved, in the course of so long a lifetime.

Nonetheless, because of John's receptivity, because he was so attuned to listening and inquiring, he made it easy to establish an immediate rapport.

I remember our first conversation, and it seems hardly weeks, or perhaps at most months, ago. What was striking about it was not anything that either of us said; it was, rather, the tone that John himself set from the very beginning. He somehow made it clear that no agenda was necessary. He was not waiting to hear profound views about the future of higher education. The only order of the day was to meet, to talk, and to begin to know one another.

It was remarked, long ago, about a particularly celebrated personage, that he lacked the power of conversation, but not, alas, the power of speech. With John, of course, it was the reverse. Mere speech, and certainly speeches, were easily dispensed with, but not conversability, not the words and the views and the play of

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the mildest wit that help to draw and keep people together, rather than set them apart.

As I think back over conversations with John, I do recall some of his views and opinions on various subjects, because he expressed them easily and naturally, and they certainly mattered to him. But I am aware, even more, of his way of *not* pressing his own ideas, not marshaling arguments, not driving toward hard and fast conclusions – at least not over lunch, or even over tea.

He knew, of course, that conclusions and actions were necessary and important. But he had no interest in fostering habits of the mind or heart that might lead to an even more querulous and quarrelsome world than the one we already inhabit. He wanted to play no part in creating even greater antagonisms than already exist among people, or any greater separation of human beings into winners and losers, either in conversation or in life.

When I think about him, I remember, yes, his remarkable strength and that wonderfully natural dignity which never deserted him during these last two or three years. But I remember, and am moved most of all, by the profound modesty and instinctive courtesy which simply emanated from him. It was as if he had come to feel that, although considerateness and common kindness would never cure all of the ills of our planet, they were very likely to help, and at the very least they were not very likely to do harm.

One day, about a year ago, John and I were seated at his customary luncheon table at the Four Seasons, where he was having his customary made-to-order special “Spaghetti Loeb” (which, as far as I could see, bore very little resemblance either to any existing form of spaghetti, or to any existing Loeb). At one point, John said matter-of-factly that he had decided to endow the Humanist Chaplain’s position at Harvard. “The . . . *what*, John?” I asked, not wanting to quite confess the full extent of my ignorance about Harvard’s many ministerial parts and functions. “Yes,” John said, “the Humanist Chaplain. He’s dedicated to being humane. He makes himself available to students, he gives advice and help, and

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he has no official doctrine.” “Deeds, not creeds,” John said, a phrase that he repeated to me several times over the years.

Deeds were indeed what John did. And all the qualities I have mentioned – the receptivity, the interest in the views of others, the mutuality in conversation and in human relations, the avoidance of ideology and dogma, the modesty and considerateness, and finally the emphasis on humane actions: all of these qualities led John intuitively to make philanthropy an inevitable and central part of his life.

His philanthropic concerns, which he shared with Peter [Frances Lehman Loeb], included, as we know, a great many institutions and activities. Much as he cared for all of them, however, I think it is fair to say that his deepest and most abiding commitment – or really, his affection – concerned education, and especially Harvard.

He became a member of his first Harvard advisory committee (to our School of Public Health) nearly fifty years ago. After that, there was scarcely a year when he was not actively involved in one part of the University or another – usually several simultaneously. He was on the Visiting Committee to Harvard College, the Committee on Corporate Relations, the Committees on Fine Arts and the Fogg Museum, Anthropology and the Peabody Museum, Visual and Performing Arts, Visual and Environmental Studies, the Graduate School of Design, the Business School, the Program in Health Sciences, and the Committee on Foundations.

He was vice chair of the fund-raising drive for Harvard College in the late 1950s. He chaired the fund-raising campaign for the School of Design in the mid-1960s. During the tumultuous period of the late 1960s, when alumni support seemed to falter, he stepped in with a challenge grant of his own, urging others to give generously and promptly in order to complete the Harvard campaign which was scheduled to end in 1971. He served with great distinction as one of Harvard’s outstanding Overseers, from 1962 to 1968. He was awarded an honorary doctorate of laws by

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Harvard in 1971. And, in 1985, he received the “Harvard Medal” for his unparalleled service to the University.

John has been an honorary chair of Harvard’s current University-wide fund-raising drive, and until recently, he never missed a meeting. The number and magnitude of his gifts to the University are princely in nature. There is no other word. But it was the quality and character of his giving, which a friend once described as “reverential” in spirit: it was that quality, as well as his care and thoughtfulness, which made John’s bounty so deeply impressive.

He created, for example, a fund to improve undergraduate teaching. He provided critical support for associate professors in Arts and Sciences: faculty members who are just at the most difficult point in their academic careers, trying to press forward simultaneously with major research as well as with major teaching responsibilities. In addition, there were the gifts to create the Loeb Drama Center; a major professorship and research fund at the Medical School; basic “core” support at the School of Public Health; an innovative Fellows Program at the Graduate School of Design; the Frances Loeb Library, also at the School of Design; help for the American Repertory Theatre, for Harvard’s Villa I Tatti program, and, of course, for the Humanist Chaplain.

A full accounting of John’s gifts – made together with Peter, and with generous support from the entire family – would far surpass \$100 million. And all of these gifts have come with essentially no concern for public recognition: no monuments, and no monologues, however eloquent, from the donor, only more and more modesty throughout. And so it is that John has emerged, quietly and almost imperceptibly over the decades, as the greatest single benefactor in the history of Harvard University. That is the record, pure and simple.

He is missed, and he will be remembered, in more ways than we can imagine. For myself, the loss can be partly captured in the form of a mental image that continues to recur, and will undoubtedly recur long into the future. I am settled in my seat on

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the plane, traveling from Boston to New York, preparing for meetings and events that will take place over the next two or three days. Invariably, at some moment, I think of the lunch that is scheduled with John: the customary table; the plate of Spaghetti Loeb; John's eyes, with their reservoirs of kindness; the conversation without an agenda; the hour or two, suspended out of time, like an oasis; and finally, the sense of reassurance that one had a standing invitation, so to speak, to come and share the rarest of all forms of friendship.