

A Tribute to John Dennis

It was sometimes tempting, but always perilous, to underestimate John Dennis.

John was a *gentleman* in the finest sense of that word. He was mild of manner, honorable, always considerate of others and eager to deflect attention from himself. If you were talking to John about some issue concerning him, a moment would come when you realized that he had unobtrusively changed the topic to something involving you or one of your loved ones or to some worthy project that someone else had undertaken.

But underneath this gentlemanly appearance was a force of nature. John possessed a brilliant intellect, endless curiosity, an unrelenting passion for justice and a fierce determination to right whatever wrongs he came across.

I first met John during our freshman year at Wesleyan, where we played on the soccer and squash teams together. We both went to Princeton Theological Seminary, where we were first-year roommates, and we stayed in touch for nearly sixty years. He visited me in Cambodia, where we played squash on a makeshift concrete court. Along with my wife Sunny, we traveled together to Bhutan.

John embodied the biblical concept of *servant*. The Gospel of Matthew (20:26) quotes Jesus as proclaiming, “Among you, whoever wants to be great must be your servant.” John did not use such pompous language, but more than anyone else I have ever known he lived a life – and found self-fulfillment – in the service of others. He even wrote a book about kindness. Whoever wrote the Golden Rule must have had John in mind. There was not a self-aggrandizing bone in his body.

John was humble, but never in a self-conscious or calculating way. It was simply the way he lived. He was hugely competent and smart, took his work seriously, deeply loved his family and enjoyed a good laugh. And he could laugh at himself.

Wherever John saw injustice or suffering, whether it be in Oregon, South Africa, Ireland or the Middle East, his first instinct was to ask, “What can I do about it?” And more often than one might expect he came up with an answer to his question. While he was visiting me in Cambodia he became fascinated with efforts to rid the country of the hundreds of thousands of landmines that continued to cause death and destruction long after the Khmer Rouge had been routed. His response was to focus on child victims of the mines and to raise funds to support agencies providing prosthetic limbs – something that he continued to do for many years and that involved multiple trips back to Phnom Penh.

Victor Butterfield, who was president of Wesleyan during our years as students, liked to say that the purpose of a Wesleyan liberal arts education was to produce graduates who would “contribute to the world out of proportion to their numbers.” In his preaching, his writings, his love of family and friends and in his many accomplishments, demonstrated the power of liberal arts ideals. Vic would no doubt be proud.

With John’s passing we have lost a good man. But because he trod the earth for 82 years, we are all better people.

Ted Fiske
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