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Tom Holdych: A Tribute

*Chris Rideout**

Tom Holdych graduated from the University of Illinois Law School, where he was Editor in Chief of the Law Review. He seemed headed to a life as a successful practicing lawyer, first clerking for the California Supreme Court and then practicing at the well-known Los Angeles firm of O'Melveny and Meyers. But in 1972, he changed course, coming to the Pacific Northwest to teach at a new law school that is now the Seattle University School of Law. As a founding faculty member, Tom taught the very first class at the law school, on September 5, 1972. He also served as the first faculty advisor to the school's Law Review. He set a demanding academic standard for his teaching, one against which other members of the faculty could measure their own rigor.

Roughly a year after the law school opened its doors, a movie called *The Paper Chase* dramatized law school life and popularized the figure of the law professor—in the movie, Professor Kingsfield—as someone who could be unyieldingly rigorous and exacting in the classroom. I have no direct evidence that Tom modeled himself after this movie character, but he did develop a reputation for being exacting, rigorous, and incisive in his approach to legal analysis, and for expecting the same of his students. Like Kingsfield, Tom was feared by many of the students in his class. But by the time they had graduated and entered law practice, most of them realized with gratitude what his teaching had given them.

Tom primarily taught courses in Contracts and the Uniform Commercial Code, looking at legal questions through an economic lens. This allowed even more discipline to his method, and he challenged his students—especially those in the first year—to overcome their common sense assumptions and learn to engage in the kind of uncompromising, analytical thinking that would serve them well as lawyers. This became his hallmark as a teacher, and a key part of his success. When I speak with alumni of the law school, Tom's name regularly comes up as one of the professors who best prepared them for the discipline of the law. That is how his students primarily knew Tom. I, however, came to know Tom through lunch.

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For many years, Tom chaired a faculty working group on commercial law, of which I was a peripheral member. The committee's work was routine—coordinating course offerings in commercial law, lining up speakers, and advising students interested in that area of law practice. Tom served as Chair and did the work without complaint, both because it had to be done and because he was devoted to helping students enter into commercial law practice. He knew that the other faculty members in the group would regard the meetings as an avoidable chore, so he reserved a table in the faculty dining room and scheduled the meetings over lunch. With lunch on the table, we came.

Tom always worked hard, and he was business-like about his faculty duties. Accordingly, our lunches always had an agenda. We would work through one item at a time, somewhat like a court working through a motions calendar, with Tom presiding. It sounds deadly ordinary, and could have been, but Tom made it entertaining. His active mind made even the routine work of the committee engaging. He kept the discussion moving and lively, even when the agenda was prosaic. When a consensus began to emerge in one direction or another, he would challenge us to look at things from a different angle. When something seemed straightforward, he would bring in a different point of view. When we thought we might be finished with a topic, he could break it down into smaller pieces, asking us to look at things we had passed over. Tom's mind would begin to whirl over even the most routine matters, and in watching him, I began to understand what it would have been like to be in his class. He was playing with the agenda for the meeting, analytically teasing out the implications of its topics, and loving every minute of it. He never stopped being the law teacher, even at lunch. I could see how fortunate his students had been.

Anyone who knew Tom knew that he was of course much more than a law professor. He was as devoted to his family and to his faith as he was to his teaching. He was overly generous with his time, giving not only to his students outside of class but also to his social service work. He possessed impeccable personal integrity. He was one of the first I knew to bemoan the ownership of the Seattle Mariners (now a common parlor topic among Seattleites). He occasionally still wore a tie striped with the school colors of the University of Illinois. He helped me with a commercial remedy when an auto shop mistakenly drilled a hole straight through the roof of my car. He knew how to catch salmon. And he had a puckish smile that Kingsfield lacked. The law school and the larger community were both well-served by Tom's decision to come north and become a teacher, now almost forty years ago. He left us too soon.