

A Tribute to John from Clement

John and I went back a long way. We were high school classmates for several years, then we went through university together at McGill. I consider it my privilege to have the opportunity to say a few words of what John meant to me.

In high school, John was a very skilled soccer player. He was a member of the varsity team. Among the student body, he was our hero. I was not good enough to be on the school team, but I played with him in scrimmage games on numerous occasions. Many times I would make a miscue which led to a goal by the opposing team. John would come up to me, pat me on the shoulder, and say "Don't be down on yourself, you will get one back next time". From an early age, despite his *big man on campus status*, I knew John as a humble and forgiving gentleman.

John and I were not housemates when we were studying in Montreal. Every now and then, I would go visit him when I felt lonely. He often invited me to stay for dinner. We had no money at that time and there was never much in the refrigerator. John would go to the market to buy a big bag of chicken gizzards for 50 cents. That was no small change for a poor student trying to earn enough money in the summer to pay for his tuition. John would then slice up the gizzards, and stir fry them with some vegetables and oyster sauce. To me, the dish was like manna from heaven. To this day, I still like to eat chicken gizzard because it reminds me of John's generosity. It was in his nature to share what he had, no matter how big or small. After dinner, we would talk about our course work and girls that we pined for, our hopes and our fears, anything and everything. John was the type of person whom you could open your heart to. He was an attentive listener, a man with good sense, and a trusted friend. I would always feel comfortable confiding in him.

There was a scary incident in our McGill days that I would like to recall for you. One evening, John and I, his brother Dominic, and another close friend Bill, were walking back from Chinatown. Suddenly, two cars came out of nowhere to cut us off, one in front and one behind. Four men jumped out, pointed their guns at us, and ordered us to get into one of the cars. At first we thought we were being kidnapped. But that did not make much sense because our families had no money to pay for ransom. When the cars finally pulled into the garage of a police station, it dawned on us that we were being arrested. The police thought we were gang members involved in some illegal activities in Chinatown. To add insult to injury, they mistakenly identified me as the ringleader. My protest fell on deaf ears. Nonetheless John kept insisting on my innocence. He told the police, over

and over again, that I was just a stupid Biochemistry student. When the whole fiasco was eventually resolved, the police gave us a ride home. Nothing bonded us for life as the experience of being threatened at gunpoint. It gave new meaning to the term “comrades in arms”. But I will never forget that John stood up to defend my honour, even though he himself was in hot water.

I am glad I was able to repay John’s kindness by introducing him to Janet. It was love at first sight. They could not take their eyes off each other from the moment they met. They spent a great deal of time in the library together, but I don’t know how much studying they did. They were married in 1971, and it was a perfect union. Love is not the only thing that held their marriage together; there was also mutual respect that cemented their relationship. If you want to know why John was so admired, it was because he earned that esteem by respecting other people.

Much to my regret, I lost touch with John during most of our adult lives. I missed those precious years when his children were growing up. One day, shortly before he passed away, I said to him “You must have done something right to produce three such high-achieving kids”. He replied “I give all the credit to Janet”. This is so typical of John; he never wanted to take a bow in the spotlight. I do not doubt for one minute Janet’s devotion and encouragement. However, behind the scenes, I can see with clarity John’s role as the helmsman who charted the course for his family and guided them through calm seas.

I have painted my memory of John using the colours on my palette. Each one of us has fond thoughts of John in our own way. Even though we are gathered here today to say goodbye to John, we must also remember to celebrate John’s life in the most vivid tones that he so richly deserves.