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A Celebration of Dennis Belcher

*Bruce Stone**

This is a celebration of the life of Dennis Belcher, not a mourning of his passing.

I first met Dennis in the early 1980s when we were involved in a very large estate in Virginia. My client was one of the primary beneficiaries of the estate of a lady who was a Virginia resident. It was a very large and a very complicated estate, and it seemed that every law firm and every prominent lawyer in Virginia was involved in the estate. All these older, courtly, and distinguished lawyers – and then there were Dennis and me – two young lawyers. That’s where I first got to know Dennis. The older lawyers did the talking in court and the posturing, and Dennis and I and the other younger lawyers did the work.

I took an immediate liking to Dennis – how was it possible not to like Dennis? As I got to know Dennis better and better, I came to realize what an incredibly intelligent and gifted person he was. Not just incredibly smart, but *quick*. He could look at something and see through it – like seeing how a Rubik’s cube fits together, in one vision.

I had the privilege of serving on the Executive Committee of AC-TEC one year as a member at large while Dennis was an officer. I got to experience his style of leadership firsthand. There were some complicated and thorny issues – and Dennis had a way of seeing through them right away, of seeing what the solution was and had to be. But Dennis was the epitome of a true leader. Even though he knew where we had to be and where we would wind up, he wouldn’t *tell* us that. Instead, he invited and encouraged input and discussion from everyone. Then Dennis would inevitably demonstrate and employ that incredibly effective and wonderful style of gentle persuasion. By the time that we would wind up our discussions, somehow we would wind up exactly where Dennis knew we would be and should be. He was patient and never condescending. He would never tell you what you ought to think and decide. His was that most remarkable style of leadership that is so lacking at all levels in our society, of building consensus by gentle persuasion, and guiding and managing people in collective decision making. He could have saved time by being autocratic and taking us straight to the answer, but he wasn’t that way.

* Bruce Stone is a Fellow and former president of the American College of Trust and Estate Counsel. He was privileged to be one of the many friends of Dennis Belcher.

Not that Dennis was always a facilitator and a consensus builder, someone who would quietly mediate different points of view into a shared solution. Dennis could be a fierce and effective advocate. He knew how to do battle. In one very limited and humorous example of that, I remember back in 2010 at the Heckerling Institute on Estate Planning, Dennis and I had a disagreement over how states should address the impending repeal of the estate tax, in enacting statutes to tell us how to interpret and administer wills and trusts that were drafted in tax concepts that all of a sudden would be repealed. How much goes into a credit shelter trust drafted with tax formula language, when the very tax itself has been repealed? We had one approach in Florida, and Virginia had its own approach. We were going to have a friendly debate about this over the course of a couple of podium presentations – going back and forth in sort of a staged debate, each defending his own state’s approach. Dennis as much as agreed with me in private that our approach in Florida was probably better, but he certainly wasn’t going to say so. The problem was that my podium presentation was earlier in the week, and Dennis spoke later in the week when I would have no chance to make any more remarks. What happened? If you knew Dennis, you will laugh when I tell you that he took the podium and ripped into our Florida approach, and smiled at me sitting there in the audience as he looked at me and said, “never underestimate the power of the person who has the microphone last.” All I could do was to laugh genuinely at that private humor.

I am convinced that Dennis could have been and done anything that he ever set his mind to do. Be a U.S. Senator? Yes, and he would be wonderful. Be the head of a major company? No question. I truly believe that Dennis would have risen to the top of anything, any endeavor, upon which he might have set his mind. Dennis chose to grace the legal profession, and our field of specialty in particular. Dennis was not just a trusts and estates lawyer – he was a *lawyer*, and a lawyer in the highest and the best sense of our profession. It is telling that Dennis was recognized and ranked in one of the most prestigious ranking systems as *the best* lawyer in Virginia – not as the best trusts and estates lawyer, not as one of the best lawyers in Virginia, but as *the best lawyer in the Commonwealth of Virginia*. Now I don’t live and die by those rating systems, and I doubt that you do either, and Dennis certainly didn’t, but this singular accomplishment does show the incredibly high esteem in which he was held by the entire legal profession in Virginia.

What I will miss most about Dennis is his infectious grin, that laugh of his which I can still hear, his incredible intelligence and wisdom in giving me guidance when I would ask him for guidance – and I did ask him for guidance – and his true friendship. When Dennis was your friend, he was *your friend*.

Why, even with this unfathomable loss, do I choose instead to celebrate and be glad for the life of Dennis Belcher? He was at the top of his game. He was living life and enjoying it. He and Vickie were where they wanted to be. He had accomplished so much and was on the way to accomplish even more. He was taken from us at an apogee. Yes, too soon, way too soon, but Dennis had climbed to the mountain top. I'm confident that he is there right now, looking down on us, grinning and laughing with that wonderful laugh of his, with the wisdom that we too will one day join him.

God bless you, my dear friend. You enriched my life, and for that I am eternally grateful.

