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In Memoriam: David P. Leonard

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Among his many accomplishments, David Leonard was a leading scholar on the law of character evidence. He abhorred attacks on character, and expertly documented the historical and psychological justifications for banning this type of evidence. Doubting the predictive value of attributions of character, he believed that human misconduct was often due to the pressure of situations rather than broadly defective traits of character. He carried this skepticism about the value of character judgments into his personal life. I can't remember his saying an unkind word about another person's personality or character, and he was uninterested in hearing such words from anyone else. He was truly gentle and forgiving.

Despite his documented evidence about the unpredictability of human character, I can't help but think of David's life itself as a piece of evidence that there is such a thing as an enduring trait of character. He may have been right in thinking that character evidence should ordinarily be barred from the courtroom. But his personal life certainly indicated that good character does lead to good deeds. He was consistently kind, generous and courageous. Perhaps he happened to encounter situations that caused him to display that conduct, or perhaps he was just an exceptional man as well as an exceptional scholar.

I sometimes had academic disagreements with David—for example, as the reader might guess, about the value of character evidence. Another trait that he invariably displayed was the ability to be equable about academic differences of opinion, to critique and be critiqued without any damage to friendship.

Steve Goldberg and I were extremely lucky in convincing David to join us in co-authoring a text on evidence. He maintained an active and diligent interest in the revision of this book well into his final illness. He was an inspiration to his fellow authors. We will miss him profoundly.

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