

John A. Munroe

My Uncle John was the nicest man I ever knew. And I don't mean that lightly or with faint praise. His kindness, his humor, his attention to *you* were simply extraordinary. When I was little boy and Uncle John was visiting us one time, my father said to me: "Do you notice what a nice man Uncle John is?" I didn't exactly need to be asked that, but it was my father's way of letting me know that a few people are very special with uncommon human qualities that set them apart from the rest of us.

For me, of course, Uncle John's humanity existed in a context—and the context was *family*. Our family as I know it, and I know that my mother and sister would agree, was established and defined by four people, soon to be two couples, who met at the University of Delaware in 1944 and married the following summer. There were Dorothy and Katheryne, two graduate students in chemistry, still in their early 20s; and John and Dick, two not-quite-so-young historians with shared interests in early America, state politics, and a passion for giving respectability to local history.

And the rest, as they say, *is history*—two couples, two families, two universities, two states, and shared lives for more than six decades.

Our families would visit each other frequently, swapping car rides to New Brunswick and Newark. As a member of the New Brunswick clan, I was always a little jealous of how pretty Newark was, as I am again today. And there my uncle was—the nicest of family men, the department chairman, the scholar, and the closest friend of the person *I* was closest to, my father.

There were also decades of vacations at Cape Cod—from the mid-1950s when our families rented the Jarvis place on Doane Road in Harwichport, through nearby summer rentals in the 1960s and 1970s, until the time when each couple finally bought modest houses, just a mile or two from each other, and, of course, in Harwich. Uncle John was never on the tennis court or the sailboat and seldom in the lake, but he was ever present, ever wise, and ever nice.

And what an astonishing range of things he knew about—the earned run averages of Phillies pitchers, the exact reasons for the latest foreign policy debacle, the recent accomplishments of his former students. It was always a sheer pleasure to be in his garrulous, friendly, loving company.

Others will speak today of his relationship with my Aunt Dot; with Stephen, Carol, and Michael and *their* children; with his University of Delaware colleagues; and with his students. But I want to say a word about his friendship with my father. It was very long and deep. It embraced profoundly shared professional interests and achievements and uncannily similar family story lines. But it also embraced an unusual commitment to each other, to hearing what the other had to say (often during their special Tuesday lunches at Cape Cod), and to expressing sorrows that perhaps only their wives were also permitted to glean. I never knew a greater friendship than theirs.

Uncle John's loves and commitments were ones that I understand and share—to family, friends, and students; to teaching and studying history; to state universities and their destinies. But I never fully grasped how he expressed those affections and those commitments so graciously and seamlessly, with such humor and humanity.

Everyone *here* was touched by the gentle, friendly, talkative, endearing flow of his life. He *was nice*, but in such richness and in so many dimensions we will never see his like again. And so we celebrate the life he lived, and we miss him.

Richard L. McCormick
October 15, 2006