

‘Your job is to work yourself out of a job.’ – John B. Mason

Of all that John taught me, which is certainly immeasurable, I most often return to this phrase. For me, it summarizes all that he was and will forever remain – a beacon of honourable hard work, encouraging us all to live in a way that leaves something positive for those around us.

A simple phrase, so easy to say yet impossible to achieve if one lives without admirable intent. Professional in nature, yet deeply personal, the words exemplify what life encompassed for John, for one cannot work himself or herself out of a job without building something, notably relationships. For John, professional and personal were not completely distinct. We all know that he could be frank in his communication, often asking me in the middle of dissecting a report, ‘now, what about your personal life?’. He might tell me that work was not the only important life component while asking for an analysis during holidays. He dedicated his professional life to international nutrition and inspired others to do the same, yet also encouraged us to live fully, as he did. I loved that dichotomy. He reminded us all that we could not wholly live our lives, or contribute to others, without participating in it all.

John’s professional accomplishments are immense and far reaching. For all of those whom he taught and continue to work in international nutrition, his work still guides our own. He changed the lives of those of us who will not forget his name, and many more who will never know his name, but have benefited from his tireless efforts. At Tulane, his trainees became known as ‘Masonites’, a designation that has since been given to me all over the world once someone discovers my affiliation. I wear that label with pride.

John was a positive disruptor, a rebel with a cause, always driven to ask difficult questions and seek answers in search of advancement. It’s one of the qualities I most admired in him no matter how much it put me in the hot seat, merely by association, with those who disagree with his ideas. He could be dogmatic, even angry, in his fight but the intent was always kind and just. The first 1,000 days, why not the first 500? Mothers are important. Well...why not? John’s career, and his guidance of mine, led me to where I sit today. There is no doubt that my work is owed in large part to him. Even so, I remember him most for the mix of professional and personal impact he had on my life. On my first day as an MPH student at Tulane, without a single day of international nutrition experience, I told him that I wanted to work for him. He smiled and asked that I tell him about myself. That was the first of his lessons for me on how to live, delivered over the years through in person and telephone conversations, Halloween parties, emails and skype chats. I value the detailed explanations of complex public health problems that I’ve saved, as insights into his mind were gifts. However, I equally cherish the photos of his latest drawings or the incredible tree house he built for his much-adored grandchildren, and the stories about his children’s latest accomplishments. He was an inspiration in more ways than one.

In a more recent job reference, John wrote that I was ‘of good stock.’ To have him consider me a truly decent person is one of the highest compliments I will ever receive. I’ll always strive to live as John did – when something ends, either professional or personal, for whatever reason,

leaving something behind that is beneficial for one or many. As John would say, tell your story, weave it with honest work, life, love, a shandy or two and data. Always data.

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