

JOHN EDWARD PORTER (1935-2022)

In the time it takes to speak a eulogy, what could John Porter get done?

If it is April 27, 2014, and he is accepting the Public Welfare Medal of the National Academy of Sciences, he could look an audience of scientists straight in the eye and tell them things they didn't want to hear. He could remind them that science was under attack and he could tell them the hard truth that they had been silent in its defense. He could make crystal clear that each person in the room was needed as an advocate for science; and he could show them, practical step by practical step, how to change the fate of a nation by speaking for science at a neighborhood school, a community club, a coffee shop, a living room, a backyard, meeting people where they are.

And because he was John Porter, he could pledge to stand with them, shoulder to shoulder, so that--as advocates together--they could *seize the unlimited potential of American science and make it real*.

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If it is July 8, 2011, when the financial crash is wreaking havoc in the economy, and funding for science is shrinking by the day, he could invent one of Research!America's most powerful tools--our weekly letters to the research and research stakeholder community. We're now at letter #563, and I can testify that it takes a fair amount of discipline to generate a letter, week in, week out, for 563 weeks. But John Porter knew about discipline--he embodied discipline-- when he looked at you, discipline radiated into you, like an electric shock, in much less time than it takes to speak a eulogy.

In the time that I'm standing before you, what could John Porter get done?

If his voice was needed to finalize a financial contribution, he could pick up the phone and be an extraordinary voice for research. He hated those calls, but he had John Porter discipline, and I don't recall that he ever failed.

What could John Porter get done?

If you were heading to Capitol Hill, and especially if you had impressive titles and were inclined to believe in them, he could remind you--calmly, but insistently--that if you want to get anything done, you needed to pay close attention to the Congressional staffers whom you were likely to overlook. That was a Porter Principle, and he walked the walk. No one was ignored; no one was de-valued.

In the time it takes to speak a eulogy ...

... John could master any electronic device.

... he could play the 17th hole at Belle Haven ... at least if the pin is not back left.

... he could savor a vodka tonic, or a bowl of risotto (no mushrooms).

In many fewer words than I am using for his eulogy,

John could remind you of what matters--remind you of why you chose your life's work. He could challenge you, inspire you, stiffen your backbone. I can hear his voice now: "You can change the image of what is to come ... but you can't do it sitting on your hands."

And on the last day of his life, in the time it takes to speak this eulogy, he could look me in the eye and ask, 'If you could live your life over again, what would you work to become?'

He didn't ask me, 'If you could live your life over, what would you *want to do*?'

He didn't ask me, 'If you could live your life over, what would you *want to be*?'

He asked me, 'What would you *work to become*?'

This was John Porter's discipline. He believed deeply that our potential for good, both individually and as a nation, is unlimited. But we don't reach that potential just by wanting it.

John knew first hand the infinite varieties of our failures. He knew how easily, both individually and as a nation, we descend into selfishness, into cynicism, into exploitation.

He knew that our potential for good doesn't fulfill itself.

So he didn't ask me, on his last day, what I would *want to do*, or what I would *want to be*.

He asked me what I would *work to become*.

This, I believe, is John's legacy not just to me, and not just to those who knew and cherished him, but to the entire nation.

This is his enduring challenge to each of us, and to all of us.

That we set ourselves, each day, to *work toward the good that we wish to become*.

If we take up the challenge, if we set ourselves to work toward the good we wish to become, I know that John will be standing with us, shoulder to shoulder, *so that we can together seize the unlimited potential of our nation, and make it real*.

- Mary Woolley
June 15, 2022