JOHN SEARLE CELEBRATION OF 50 YEARS AT BERKELEY, 2/23/09
Remarks of Robert H. Cole

We have it on the highest authority that a prophet is not without honor – save in his own country and his own house. In the teeth of this irony, and in an ironic age, we are here in John Searle’s house to honor him. For who could deny that John is a prophet? Nothing drives a prophet crazier than the people’s ignorance of the obvious, and John’s whole career has been to get us to see the obvious – which of course is plenty complex when you get into it – and to change our ways of thinking. His lifelong assault on error and his dedication to truth have always been supercharged with the moral commitment of the prophet. Knowing the truth is a moral necessity. And who’s it necessary for? (Illegally ending a sentence with an italicized preposition like that is a favorite Searle-ism, as you know.) It’s for us, the possessors of knowledge. The prophet’s love of truth is a fundamental moral concern for persons.

I imagine there is no honor so sweet as this in his own house. John’s other honors are impossible to count, but we know him best and we owe him most. We know him and we owe him for his monumental philosophical work, which is mostly what John Searle is to others. But we know him and owe him for much more, too: for engaging charm, for personal edification, for loyal friendship, for teaching of stunning power, for unfailing insistence on the highest standards of institutional integrity, and for enduring service to this University. Only we can acknowledge John for all this, and we do it now with all our might.
It does take all your might to acknowledge what John has accomplished in just 50 years. Two things are striking about the list I just recited. One is how comprehensive it is; John has done everything, personal and professional. The other striking thing is that every thing John has done – from social relations to writing books – is of world class quality. It is – to use another of his favorite words – prodigious.

The most profound of that service to the University, which most of you did not see first hand, was John’s crucial participation in the Free Speech Movement and his even more profound role in the administration of Chancellor Roger Heyns that followed the FSM. The truth is we might well not be here today without John’s service as assistant to the Chancellor. He helped save Berkeley as one of the world’s great universities. We were in fact on the very brink of collapse as a serious university.

It was during the FSM that I came to know John well. He had been an early and important leader of the faculty group that supported the FSM students. I joined that small steering committee relatively late, and we drafted the famous December 8th resolution that ended the immediate crisis. When Roger Heyns became Chancellor six months later, he appointed Budd Cheit as Executive Vice Chancellor and John as Special Assistant to the Chancellor; Budd asked me to become Faculty Consultant. I think it is fair to say that the four of us, with very
different roles and authority of course, essentially ran the political side of the campus and its relations to the Regents, Governor and public.

What the FSM sought was to bring the constitutional protections of speech and due process to the campus. The precise issues were in some ways technical, but the outcome was about much more. Campus restrictions on partisan political activities and on speech activities of every which sort in the early 1960s would be unimaginable to the contemporary student or faculty member, so profoundly did the success of the FSM, epitomized by the December 8th resolution, change American universities. Still more, the very conception of the university and of the student in it changed radically, forever, and for the better.

What the Heyns administration sought was to create and guide that change. It sought to institutionalize freedom of speech and other legitimate claims of students that came along with the FSM revolution, to build on its energy for educational and curricular reform, and to do all this while adhering to the strictest principles of academic integrity and while fighting off the enormous pressures, internal and even more external, designed to politicize the university. Berkeley did succeed – against the odds, perhaps. In all of this, John Searle played a clarifying, leading part.

For a couple of years, then, John and I shared something that happens to very few. We worked countless hours together on extraordinary issues, with such
intensity, intimacy, and mutual concern that I would weep to try to describe it here. I treasure it and the 45 year deep family friendship it began; these accidents of personal history have made all the difference. I will say only that I learned there, in the trenches, under terrible pressures, with everything we cared about at stake, with major societal consequences at stake, what a rare and magnificent man John Searle is: brilliant, lucid, practical, principled, loyal, courageous, loving, and even vulnerable like the rest of us.

We had first met earlier in the fall of 1964, when I was already lucky to have Dagmar as my student in Torts and John was already prominently outspoken for free speech, which rightly seemed to him definitional in a university. Paul and Svetlana Alpers invited us all to dinner to meet each other. The first thing John said to me, in that engaging growl you would recognize, was, “Glad to meetcha. Read that article of yers on causation. Reading yer sentences is like picking up jagged rocks.” I knew at once that we would become close friends. Actually, the only time I was ever troubled by this was when he told me he had made the same criticism of Michel Foucault.

Was that a long time ago or just the other day? No one knows what to make of 50 years, and I won’t try, but we should notice that John Searle has been first a prominent and then a dominant presence at Berkeley for more than one-third of its entire 141-year history.
Just as John has made the most of these 50 years, the Searles have made the most of them. Their lives together have that same impossible comprehensiveness and quality that characterize John’s career. Dagmar is a part of everything John has done. They have two remarkable sons, Thomas and Mark. They have traveled everywhere for John’s lectures, they ski and more or less ran a winery, they’ve had dogs and cabins and oriental rugs, they know history and sociology and music and the politics of Berkeley real estate. They have many good friends. Just as John has stood for principles without moralizing, they have had a fullness of life without indulgence. The prophet is always there to assure restraint, duty, and work.

The other day, I happened on something by a prominent law professor, taking John to task for having a “totalistic” view of “science,” reducing everything to the particles of physics and leaving no room for “humanity.” This seems to me entirely to miss the point. Someone morally dedicated to persons, who has created a career of such incredible fullness and lived a life of such zest and richness is unlikely to have a philosophy of rigid sterility. The point is that the real world is full enough and rich enough as it is, without self-deceived theorizing of one form or another. John’s philosophical work that explains this is full and rich, and the reality it explains makes room for all that is full and rich in experience. What the prophet insists on is that we look at the real world head on, not as we would like it to be.
“The greatest poverty is not to live in a physical world,” says Wallace Stevens, no stranger to humanity. Although he is more interested in the imagination than in the brain and although John might not use the word ‘metaphysical’ as Stevens does, I’d like to think that what Stevens goes on to say captures, in its way, John Searle’s gift to us; so let me end with that.

And out of what one sees and hears and out
Of what one feels, who could have thought to make
So many selves, so many sensuous worlds,
As if the air, the mid-day air, was swarming
With the metaphysical changes that occur,
Merely in living as and where we live.

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