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Becoming a Law Teacher: Three Stories 2021 Rutter Award Acceptance Speech

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ABSTRACT

Each year, the UCLA School of Law presents the Rutter Award for Excellence in Teaching to an outstanding law professor. On April 28, 2021, this honor was given to Professor Hiroshi Motomura. *UCLA Law Review Discourse* is proud to continue its tradition of publishing a modified version of the ceremony speech delivered by the award recipient.

AUTHOR

Hiroshi Motomura is the Susan Westerberg Prager Distinguished Professor of Law and Faculty Co-Director of the Center for Immigration Law and Policy at the UCLA School of Law. He is the author or co-author of several widely cited books and many influential articles on immigration law and immigrants' rights. Professor Motomura has testified in Congress and been a volunteer advocate in significant court cases and policy initiatives, including the efforts that led to the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. He is one of the founders of the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network (RMIAN).



Thank you very much, Dean Mnookin, and thank you to Paul Rutter and the entire Rutter family for your steadfast support of teaching all these many years. One thing has become clear to me, when teaching is recognized by presenting this award in April: even though the individuals who receive this honor change from year to year, the constant is a recognition that teaching—and students—remain at the core of what we do in this building.

It's traditional on these occasions to offer some thoughts on teaching, and I'll try to do just that, but I have to start by commenting on some irony or even some small discomfort in doing so. The reason has to do with what I think makes for good teaching, at least my own peculiar idea of good teaching. It's really not about what I say or do, but instead, it's about what my students say or do. In fact, if I were to put that idea into action right now, I would ask you what *you* think about teaching.

But it would be annoying and tacky to turn the tables like that, so let me share three stories that tell something about how I approach teaching. I might not have told these stories earlier in my career, but lately I've found myself thinking more about what's influenced me over the years. Getting invitations three or four times a week to attend UCLA retirement seminars will focus your mind in this way.

I'll start, though, by thanking my students, who every year have helped me rethink what I'm trying to do as a teacher. To say "thank you" doesn't come close to expressing the gratitude that I feel for what you've taught me. And I want to thank my family, which has been the source, not only of essential support, but also of ideas that have shaped how I teach. It was their idea that I make remote learning more personal by dividing my course into two separate sections. And I've constantly measured my teaching by asking myself how my daughter, Amy, would feel if she were in my class. This line of thought is an especially rich one because Amy recently became a law professor herself.

This fall, in August, I'll begin my fortieth year as a law schoolteacher. A lot of things have happened over this time that shaped me as a teacher. Let me share just three of them with you.

The first moment was in May 1978, on the day I graduated from law school. This was so long ago that the governor of California was Jerry Brown, the first time. The outside graduation speaker was Chevy Chase, one of the mainstays of new TV show called *Saturday Night Live*. Everyone eagerly anticipated what he would say, but the faculty speaker, Caleb Foote, stole the show. The centerpiece of Professor Foote's talk was a poem by Denise Levertov, entitled *Intrusion*,¹ though as Foote

1. Denise Levertov, *Intrusion*, POETRY FOUNDATION, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42530/intrusion> [<https://perma.cc/3FL6-6AFD>].

explained, it might as well have been called, *On the Completion of a Legal Education*.

The poem is just a few lines, and it goes like this:

After I had cut off my hands
and grown new ones
something my former hands had longed for
came and asked to be rocked.

After my plucked out eyes
had withered, and new ones grown
something my former eyes had wept for
came asking to be pitied.

That's it—just eight lines. After sharing them, Professor Foote reflected on the role of law and of lawyers as a process of legitimation. In his words:

The finely honed analytical ability, the dominance of rules abstracted from human context, the impersonality of the rational process by which cases are distinguished one from another, these are at once the glories and the dangers of a legal education.

These words have stayed with me for my entire career as a lawyer and teacher. They have been a constant reminder that even if teaching starts with law and doctrine, real understanding and wisdom can come only from understanding how law shapes people's lives, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse.

The second moment I'd like to share with you is twenty years later, in 1998. I was teaching at the University of Colorado School of Law. A first-year student stopped by my office to see if I had any suggestions about a summer job. She wanted to work on immigration law and immigrants' rights in Denver. I had to tell her that there were only a couple of local organizations that provided legal services for immigrants of modest financial means, and as far as I knew, they didn't take on law students for the summer. That's not what she wanted to hear, but that was the truth at the time.

A few weeks later, I got an announcement from the American Bar Association. It was sent by way of something that seemed pretty new at the time, through a way of sending messages called e-mail. The ABA was offering \$5000 mini-grants for projects that developed new ways to deliver legal services. I started thinking, maybe this could help my student do what she wanted to do in the summer. So we cooked up a plan for connecting detained immigrants with pro bono lawyers. Nothing gave us confidence that this project would last more than a few months, but at least my student would have a summer job.

We started that project, and over that summer we also applied for another small grant for immigrant legal services. That led to another grant that funded her

work part-time after she graduated. That led to a little more funding. A few years later, we added a program to represent children, and then we added a social services program. This \$5000 grant has become the Rocky Mountain Immigrant Advocacy Network, and we now have a staff of over thirty providing legal services to immigrants who can't afford lawyers.

Why am I telling you this story? It's because it taught me two lessons about teaching. One is that the essence of teaching is helping your students be their best, and there are many ways a teacher can do that. And that brings me to the second lesson from this story. Teachers have noble ambitions for the good that they hope teaching can bring about. But the best things they enable are often things they can't predict. I thought that I was just helping a student find work for the summer. But she and her classmates turned that opportunity into an organization that's one of the things I'm most proud of in my entire career. Teaching was helping a student, and she and other students took it from there. They are the ones that imagined what they could do, and they put in the hard work to make it happen, in ways I couldn't have predicted.

Just one more story, with your indulgence. This one has no precise moment to pinpoint by month and year. It's about music camp, which I've attended for one week every summer for the past twenty years, until least until this past missing pandemic year.

One thing that has shaped me as a teacher has been my life as a student of guitar and voice. If my experience is any guide, every teacher should take lessons or classes in something they do badly. And for me when I started, that was to try to play guitar, and to try to sing, and even to do both of these things at the same time.

Many times I've been asked to sing a harmony a third above the melody, or to play a solo, and I have had no idea how not to embarrass myself completely. Having that experience at music camp every August makes you think differently about being the professor who a few weeks later cold-calls on students in law school classes.

But the lesson for me hasn't been to stop cold-calling, but to think carefully about what the classroom means for students and for learning. It's not just to help students be active participants in learning, but more than that, to create settings that balance challenge with support. One important thing is that students are inspired to take chances. Another is that students understand that they have something important to say, not just to sound good, but because of their message. And another very important thing is that learning means learning to listen.

I've understood much about law teaching from being asked to take a solo on a jazz standard. It's a truly frightening thing to do when you first start, but gradually, you realize: It's about a musical idea that comes out because it's what you

want to say, and what you want listeners to hear. And I've understood so much about teaching law from being in a class at music camp that put three of us, randomly chosen, into an impromptu trio. Our teacher asked to figure out, in just five minutes, an arrangement of a popular tune to perform in front of the rest of the group. This turned out to be about listening to what the other two in your trio are doing and trying your best to add to the sound. These are all the things that good musicians are, and all the things that good lawyers are, too.

The fact is, I learned to be a law teacher by going to music camp every summer.

Thanks for listening to these stories, and thanks for being here to celebrate teaching.