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MAYNARD E. PIRSIG

Charles Alan Wright[†]

When my wife and I received the annual Christmas card from Maynard Pirsig in December of 1996 – and it was indeed “the” annual card, since for as many years as I can remember he had sent the same card, an attractive scene of the skyline of Saint Paul and Minneapolis – it had a note pasted inside:

Dear Friends & Relatives,

Just a note to wish you Good Health and much Happiness this coming year. I have decided that at 95 years of age, this will be the last year that I will be sending Season’s Greetings.

I wrote him to say that no one could possibly fault him for having decided that at ninety-five he would no longer send Christmas greetings. In February, I was saddened by the news that it would not only be through his choice that 1996 was the last year in which he sent holiday cards.

I met Maynard Pirsig on March 21, 1950. He was on a trip east to hunt for persons for appointments to the faculty at the University of Minnesota Law School. Life was much simpler in the law-school world then than it is today. I feel sure that at Minnesota now, as at Texas where I teach and at other schools that I am familiar with, an appointments committee begins work as soon as the school year begins, if not even earlier. It goes through stacks of forms that would-be law teachers have filed with the Faculty Appointments Register, organized by the Association of American Law Schools (AALS). Members of the committee go east in November to interview promising candidates at a faculty recruitment conference the AALS sponsors. Those who look best are invited back to the campus for an exhaustive several days of interviews with faculty and students. An attempt is made, though not always successfully, to complete all interviews before Christmas and to make

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decisions and extend offers shortly thereafter.

In 1950, and in the five years through 1955 when I was on the Minnesota faculty, Dean Pirsig did it all on his own. In the spring, if there were spots to fill on the Minnesota faculty, he made his trip east. He visited Washington, New York, New Haven, and Cambridge and interviewed people whose names were given to him by his friends there. Ordinarily, in New Haven he interviewed only graduate students at Yale Law School recommended by Professor Myres S. McDougal. A series of happy coincidences led to my meeting Dean Pirsig and entering a career in law teaching.

During 1949–1950, I was a law clerk to Judge Charles E. Clark of the Second Circuit. He was a former dean of the Yale Law School and had his chambers in New Haven. He also had been from the beginning the reporter for the advisory committee that the Supreme Court appointed in 1935 to draft what became the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure. Professor Wilbur H. Cherry of the University of Minnesota Law School was a member of that committee, and when he died in February 1950, Dean Pirsig was appointed to replace him.¹ So, when the dean headed east to interview candidates for his faculty, he arranged also to come to Judge Clark's chambers to discuss the work of the advisory committee. I had no thought of a teaching career. When I was a student at Yale, I took many courses in corporations, taxation, and other subjects that I thought would equip me to be a successful Wall Street lawyer. In the spring of 1950, I interviewed with several law firms in New York and Washington, but no law schools. Judge Clark, however, had been urging me to consider teaching. When Dean Pirsig came to New Haven, the judge arranged for me to be one of those the dean interviewed. It was a pleasant interview, and eight days later Dean Pirsig wrote me offering me an appointment as an assistant professor at \$4500 a year.² I had never set foot in Minnesota, but after a few days thinking about it, I accepted the offer. I have never made a better decision.

1. It is a nice coincidence that Dean Pirsig spent the last 23 years of his career teaching at William Mitchell College of Law. William D. Mitchell was a distinguished Minnesotan who had been Attorney General of the United States and who was chairman of the original Advisory Committee from its creation in 1935 until it was discharged by the Supreme Court in 1956.

2. The one specific detail I remember from our interview is Dean Pirsig asking what salary I would require if I were invited to Minnesota. I said that I was being paid \$3900 as a law clerk and I would not want to make less than that. He seemed surprised and said, "[W]e certainly would pay more than that."

Dean Pirsig's method of faculty recruitment sounds antiquated today, but it worked. I was one of three who joined the Minnesota faculty in the fall of 1950. One of the others was Kenneth Culp Davis, already the leading authority in the nation on administrative law, whom Minnesota was able to hire away from The University of Texas. The second was David W. Louisell, whom Minnesota hired from a Washington law practice to begin a teaching career that led him to the top ranks in the fields of procedure and evidence.

What was there about Dean Pirsig that made him such a successful recruiter? First, he could identify those who were, or might become, fine scholars because he was a scholar himself. His path-breaking casebook on judicial administration invented a new subject. And his casebook on professional responsibility not only went through four editions, but was itself the successor to similar casebooks by him bearing the titles *Legal Ethics* and later *Standards of the Legal Profession*.

Second was his manner. He was a quiet, unpretentious man, but with a quick smile. From his first handshake, he gave the appearance of someone you would like to have as a friend and a colleague.

Third was his enthusiasm for Minnesota. He made the state sound like the nearest approach to Utopia to be found on earth and the law school, already strong in his view, was about to take its place with the best of the state law schools. The faculty was being enlarged, an innovative new curriculum had just been adopted, and great things were just around the corner for the University of Minnesota Law School.

I have always counted myself fortunate that I began my teaching career at Minnesota and with Maynard Pirsig as dean. I was barely twenty-three years old when I taught my first class in Fraser Hall. One of the students in my class that first fall had been a year ahead of me at the Pennsylvania high school we both attended. Dean Pirsig's example and his gentle manner helped me to tame the exuberance and brashness that I brought with me without dampening my enthusiasm for what I was doing. And when I wanted to try new ways of doing things, I always had his encouragement and his support.

It has been many years since Dean Pirsig and I were together. We corresponded, but in recent years even that had died out. There were only the Christmas cards, but when they came each year, they were always a happy reminder of the fine man I was lucky

to have as a friend and to have had as my first dean. Now there will not be even the Christmas cards. But the memories of a wonderful man will remain.