

For those of us who knew Dr. Lee for over a third of a century, it's impossible to share one favorite REL-ism and memory, and very difficult to just share a couple. I'm forced to omit some pretty significant stuff, but here are some things I find myself repeating to others.

"Enjoy yourself that others may enjoy you" is a reminder that our mood is infectious, that we have influence, and that it's okay to enjoy life.

"Do everything 10% faster" is a charge to increase our urgency - not to rush and be sloppy, but to commit to doing more, pushing ourselves, and finding that expending energy can increase our energy.

But here is the one I've repeated more than any other:

"There's only one rule in music - make it sound good."

This is about music on its surface, but it's even more affecting than that.

In my 19 years as a band director, this REL-ism reminded me to keep it simple, not over-think things, and remember that music is an art form for us to enjoy.

Those of us involved in music-making know that we can lose sight of that when we obsess about perfect breathing and alternate fingering mastery and ideal blend and pitch tendencies and getting the phrasing of the crescendo just right. And when he saw moments that we were over-thinking -

"One rule in music - make it sound good."

This sticks with me, even though it's been a while since I've taught music full time. One can omit a couple words, and still live by it:

"There's only one rule - make it good."

Dr. Lee's ability to inspire student musicians and budding teachers and insecure college students to excellence was inspiring, and a key to that was his knack for keeping it simple and sticking to the essence.

He was a man of deep faith, but he didn't spout complex theology - he consistently shared the 23rd Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and the Prayer of St Francis.

He expected a high level of discipline in the band, but rarely needed to say a word - if anyone stepped out of line, he was able to nip it in the bud with a small remark that both disciplined AND make you feel seen. One of my favorite examples:

At some point my freshman year, he put out a survey to all band students to gather feedback.

I remember one statement I shared on that survey: "It's great to be part of a well-disciplined group." Those were my exact words.

Months later, during rehearsal, I got a little chatty with someone next to me.

Without glaring or staring, REL glanced my direction and casually said out of nowhere "It's great to be part of a well-disciplined group."

For him to remember that, and use that so judiciously in that moment... wow. I never talked out of turn again.

I was fortunate to see him in his final weeks, in May of this year. He was alert and communicative, but tired quickly, and when it became time to leave, it was hard.

We both knew it would be the last time we saw each other. He needed a nap. I needed to go. But we both resisted the parting.

I was waiting for something wise to come from him - a REL-ism to fit the moment, to be the last thing said between us. It wasn't coming, and then I realized he was waiting for me to make the move. I tried to think of something he said, to quote a REL-ism back at him. Nothing seemed quite right. It wasn't time to "do everything 10% faster." I found some words that I thought would work - that acknowledged the finality, but left room for more. So I awkwardly put together something I thought maybe he might like:

"Well, let's go do what comes next."

We got teary, and I feel like he looked at me approvingly, like I'd lived up to some potential. He smiled.

"Yes. Let's do what comes next."

I've got 35 years of REL memories, but I'm so grateful that was the last one. I'll never forget it.

Enjoy yourself that others may enjoy you, keep it simple, and do what comes next.