

The whole world is upside down these days.  
John Silber was right side up.

He lived during a time when genius and individuality are under constant assault, yet the universe could not manage to knock these precious qualities out of this gifted man. Try as they might, the forces of mediocrity failed to stem the flow of John Silber's brilliant self-expression.

Whether or not one shared his viewpoint is irrelevant. All great thinkers are controversial. The fact that John Silber existed and thrived in a culture that perceives any hint of unconventionality as a threat, is a source of inspiration for anyone who reveres originality. I am merely one of so many whose lives have been enhanced by this remarkable man.

Years ago, Dr. Silber – as happened so often – came under fire for his views on the Massachusetts education system. On this particular occasion, he had advocated a school experience that fostered students' curiosity and provoked thought. I could not, for the life of me, understand why he faced such passionate public objection over his desire to enrich the lives of students. So, I wrote a letter, which was published by a Boston newspaper, in which I quoted Albert Einstein, who, based on his own observations, had noted that "Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds."

Soon after publication, I received a personal letter from Dr. Silber, thanking me for standing up for him publicly and praising my use of the Einstein quote. Along the margin of the letter, he had hand written and signed an added note: "This is, by all accounts, an extremely well-written letter."

For an aspiring writer, who admired and respected Dr. Silber beyond all measure, his generous gesture was a dream come true. I framed the letter -- and the envelope it had arrived in -- and stared at it every day while plugging away at my craft.

For strivers and dreamers everywhere, John Silber's life offers hope and inspiration.

When we become frustrated at a world that too often rewards mediocrity and punishes excellence, we can remember the man who turned Boston University into a world class center of education.

When we become weary of imitation and long for even a hint of originality, we can remember the man who expressed his uniqueness so brilliantly.

When we long for someone who does not parse words or communicate with ambiguity, we can remember the man who was at all times direct and honest, whatever the cost.

Right side up when the whole world is upside down.

I am grateful to have lived in Boston during a time when John Silber made his indelible mark.

~~~~~

*Judi Paparelli is an American writer and public speaker.*