



The Returned Phone Call

Depending on your age, you probably grew up watching “Perry Mason,” “Matlock” or “Ally McBeal.” By the time you started law school, you may have had already admired Atticus Finch, Clarence Darrow or, more recently, Gerry Spence or Johnny Cochran.

The funny thing about courtroom dramas is that they rarely show law partners who squabble over firm profits, clients who refuse to pay bills, clients who refuse to be happy even after their case has been won, young associates who have others’ mistakes blamed on them, and even judges who truly don’t care that you have cases in three other courtrooms at the same time as theirs.

Those movies also don’t prepare you for that moment when the pride of winning a trial or motion is quickly stifled by the mounting telephone messages, bills and stacks of papers awaiting your return to the office. Sometimes, it seemed that the great moments of practicing law, such as recovering custody of a child, winning a criminal trial or guiding a client successfully

through bankruptcy, were just small moments of escape from the oppressive grind that is the practice of law.

But then it changed.

It all began with the returned phone call.

The voice on the other end of the line was Jeanne Marie Leslie, and I was terribly uncomfortable talking with her. I thought her group, the Alabama Lawyer Assistance Program, only dealt with substance abuse. Since I’m not a big drinker, maybe THAT was the problem. Maybe I needed her to recommend heavy drinking to combat the practice of law. Perhaps she was going to tell me that I should start drinking heavily and also to get something prescribed. I didn’t mention that...since we had never met she might not have thought it was funny at the time.

The conversation went differently from what I expected. I have always enjoyed the amazement of clients as I would listen to the facts of their lives and then recite additional facts that they had not yet shared with me. As we all know, so many divorces, bankruptcies and criminal cases

fall into fact patterns that we often can fill in the blanks and impress clients with our insight and wisdom. This time, the shoe was on the other foot. I was the one discussing the issues of the practice of law and a family member dealing with difficult issues.

Somehow, Jeanne Marie could articulate my issues better than I. I was both impressed and relieved. For a moment, I actually cried. The conversation was cathartic, but I am thankful it was just the beginning. My only regret about Jeanne Marie was that I had not met with her years ago.

She asked me to meet with a counselor to discuss the stresses arising from the practice of law. No trial lawyer alive could spot the critical issues more quickly, precisely and compassionately as the counselor, referred by ALAP. Thankfully, his talent is matched by his wisdom. He gives great advice and provides the right portion of encouragement to enable you to follow that advice. He not only can spot the issues, he asks the right questions and allows you to see the issues for yourself.

The next step was contact with Laura Calloway from the Practice Management Assistance Program. Calls, e-mails, a lengthy meeting in my office, visits to Web sites, and copies of resources and handouts from seminars made me a student and disciple of the program. The contrast with her materials and my practice saddened me, not only for myself but for the lawyers I have practiced with and against through the years. Today's law students would likely disagree, but I believe there should be a brief law office practice test added to the state bar exam.

Even when on the road, Laura is available via e-mail or voice mail. I have even e-mailed her late on a Friday afternoon with an office management question that was not at all critical, but was important to me. I e-mailed her in full confidence that she would respond, and, of course, she did.

I learned a great deal about me and about the practice of law during my time in their programs. It was an experience that has changed my life in several ways. It also caused me to profoundly appreciate every single person I have met with the Alabama State Bar.

But.....there's more.

There is one very specific lesson that was taught to me at one time or another by each person with whom I dealt. It was one of the first things Jeanne Marie Leslie told me. As I later heard my counselor and Laura Calloway tell me, I realized just how universal it is for lawyers. This lesson is simple to recite but terribly difficult to learn.

Lawyers are, by their very nature, excessively self-sufficient. During almost every day of our lives we are presented with other peoples' problems to solve. In our office, people walk in, sometimes unannounced, to present their problems. When we go to school plays for children or grandchildren, someone wants to discuss a problem. When we go to church, someone wants to discuss a problem. When we dine out or even when we are on vacation we are presented with other peoples' problems.

Some problems require only a quick answer, while others may require research or correspondence. Still other problems require sometimes hundreds of hours of meetings, research, depositions,

preparation, and, ultimately, of trial. We are in some ways beasts of burden; people dump their issues on our backs and expect a wonderful result notwithstanding the underlying facts.

The lesson is that we cannot bear the issues of everyone else alone.

It is unhealthy to your body, your law practice and your relationships to bottle up your anxieties and keep them repressed. Conversations, exercise, hobbies, time off, and even counseling, if necessary, should be a way of life for you. Most people in this world think they have stressful jobs, and perhaps they do. But we know that our stresses, burdens, anxieties and challenges are more intense than most.

That's just the way it is.

I challenge you to take an afternoon off and visit the Alabama State Bar office. I also challenge you to make use of their resources. I mistakenly thought that most of their programs were for discipline, substance-abusers and those with discernable

psychological issues. These people are not bureaucrats interested in pushing paper and justifying their jobs; they are real people who genuinely care about lawyers and understand the issues you face.

One last thing.

Sometimes you may hear portrayals of those with the state bar as people analogous to rogue agents from the IRS or FBI. My experience has been that they truly understand that sometimes bad things happen to good people. Although I have always tried to be compassionate and forgiving, my experiences with the state bar have enabled me to listen to and serve clients even more compassionately than before.

Descartes so famously wrote, "I think, therefore I am." The programs at the state bar have helped me change the paradigm of how I think about myself, my family and my practice.

My hope is that you will let them help you, and perhaps your colleagues, as well. ▲▼▲

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