

What Have We Learned? Fuel for Our Future Together

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As the legal profession has traversed the last year and a half through a pandemic, and a host of unique challenges that seemingly came out of nowhere, we have all tried to find our footing again, and in our own way, overcome the challenges. Whether you are a lawyer working in-house for a large company, the lone lawyer keeping an emerging company compliant and out of a courtroom, or working at a private law firm big or small, each of us has had a unique set of questions and quandaries keeping us, and the people we serve, up at night. All at the same time we have had to deal with the reality that we are living through the real life personal challenges of a pandemic, even when our work plate is overflowing. I keep thinking someday my grandchildren will read in a U.S. history textbook about the pandemic and all we have endured as a society over this time. It will be quite a chapter! But how will it end? That is up to us. And it will depend on whether we can take the things that we learned from this experience forward with us to make us better lawyers and people. For me, while I have always appreciated these three points below, the pandemic has shined a light on the importance of “living” them, and by doing so we can come out of this stronger than when we entered it.

1. Wellness Matters

We must change the perception and stigma related to reaching out for help when you need it. It can make a good life a great life, and in certain instances could literally save lives. As the statistics have borne out over the years, preserving mental health is an “occupational hazard” when it comes to the legal profession. While we all signed up to be a lawyer when we made our way through school and the bar exam, nobody could fully appreciate the stress that comes from representing another person or company, and fighting for their legal rights, until you experience it. And the cumulative impact of the seemingly endless buffet of legal work can consume you if you don’t manage it properly. Taking care of our mental health should be top of mind for all of us. Twelve years ago, I lost someone very close to me to suicide. While he was not a lawyer, I found that it profoundly impacted how I reconciled the stress we encounter in our legal profession every day. I have never viewed mental health and wellness the same since. I now better appreciate the value of a life well-lived, and true wellness, in a way that never would have otherwise been possible. I try to honor him through my actions in this area and how I live my life. In my mind, wellness does not mean that every day is good, rather it means that you are able to live your life well through the inevitable challenges, personal or professional, that will arise. I have learned to better appreciate the bad days just as much as the good, as they are all part of our life experience. When I see the statistics about the challenges of mental health in the legal profession, it hits me in an impactful way. And it is not just something we should talk about; we have to live it. The fact is that we all work in a legal environment that can be high stakes and high stress at times, and it is easy to ignore our mental health and become consumed with days that don’t go your way. Your faith, your family, and the people you work with have an incredible impact.

The mental, physical and emotional health of all members of our legal communities is essential. Everyone comes to work with their own personal challenges, and mental health is something that more than ever we need to think about and talk about openly as something we all strive for, for the good of our careers, and most importantly, for the good of our lives. This is especially true this past year of the pandemic that has created incredible stress on all of us given our limited interactions. As I have learned through my own experiences, as well as having the privilege to get to work with amazing colleagues, “life happens” to everyone, and it is how we respond to our challenges that will define us. When it comes to the challenges of mental health, the best response is to get help when needed, and recognize that mental health is not just waiting to try to fix something that is “wrong.”

2. We Live to Serve

Winston Churchill once said, “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” While we all may define “success” somewhat differently along the continuum of our legal careers, the pandemic has highlighted that the satisfaction of living a service-based life is the key to happiness. We all want our lives to matter. And we want to make a difference. The pandemic put us all in a position where we had to respond to unique and challenging legal questions that kept our boss or our client up at night and we have been stretched in ways to be a true problem solver in this new unique environment. It has been incredibly rewarding and I have seen first-hand the gratitude created from those experiences. Whether it is mentoring a new colleague at work, handling a pro bono matter in your community, or finding the legal case that will win the day for your client, that satisfaction of serving others is what keeps us coming back for more.

With the unique circumstances of this year, the pandemic has reminded us that the fundamental focus on serving and connecting with our family and friends can be the most rewarding time that we spend. When we shift our focus off ourselves and onto others through serving, we all can make the difference that we are seeking and live a satisfying life. Over the long run, providing service almost always benefits you more than the one receiving it, and it is one of the great ironies in life. As lawyers, when we work side by side to collaborate to achieve a greater good, that is service. We have seen this past year, from the first responders in the health care field, all the way to those in the business and legal world that took action to solve complex problems to serve those in need of support, the pandemic has allowed us to find the true value of that service to others. We will be able to take that experience with us forward in a positive way as we all adapt to the present, while we also look ahead.

3. The “Golden Rule” is Key

In many ways, the societal challenges of this past year and a half has forced us to change to be a better version of ourselves. When it comes to humanity and the struggle experienced by many, listening with empathy is always the right place to start. As we continue to take strides forward, this is an opportunity for our country to practice gratitude in reflecting on what makes us great, what we can agree upon, and to learn from the past so we can be better. I am not

certain of what all the answers are, but I know this is a journey of discussion and transformation with an open mind over a period of time, as opposed to an immediate destination. I am fortunate to work at a law firm that fiercely protects a culture of inclusivity, mutual respect, and collaboration. That environment has never been more important. As a country, this past year has been a reminder of the work ahead that we need to do together.

As lawyers, we have historically been a key to the implementation of important change as well as finding the right path forward, but this time it feels different. The urgency of this moment should be seized upon to make positive progress. The best place to start is with the interactions we have each day. The truth is that we never fully know on a given day what is going on in each other's personal lives, so it is always good for us to be kind. It costs nothing, it helps everyone, and the cumulative impact of a positive environment is exponential. What I learned at summer camp many years ago has never been truer, the "golden rule" of treating others as you would like to be treated, is always the key. In a world in which we are seemingly together less right now and increasingly looking at emails, texts, and the like; there is an increased chance for disconnect. Even those who have become comfortable with the convenience and efficiency of a remote law practice, it is undeniable that real life interactions with your colleagues in our legal profession is key to mentoring, training, and the "incidental" opportunities that come from being present, together. Ultimately all our decisions on our return to a level of "normalcy" moving forward need to take that into account. We have to assess how our decisions and actions will impact others on our teams, as well as the clients we serve.

With great challenges come great opportunities. I have seen many examples of the best of us, and our profession, in so many ways as we responded through this difficult year of tragedy and change as a result of the pandemic. And I know we can continue to show everyone what can be achieved when we practice service with gratitude, and we listen to each other so we can come together with a common purpose. And someday when our children and grandchildren look back at the pandemic of 2020, they will proudly know we did our part.