

RECLAIMING OUR NOBLE PROFESSION*

*Paula A. Franzese***

I remember so well the pleasure of teaching many of you as first year students, when I would look out, at a sea of sometimes desolate faces, and say, "Please remember, no matter how bleak things seem today, you *will* be lawyers. Look in the mirror each morning and say with pride: 'Someday soon, I'm going to be an attorney.'" Dear graduates, that day has come. Today, you are lawyers. I hope that you feel proud and privileged by that fact. Your chosen life's work is a noble and high calling. The law is a precious and formidable instrument that can be wielded to accomplish profound good. As guardians of this mighty instrument, you are now, by definition, powerful, in a unique position to alter for the better all that you see.

Alarming, our profession and, indeed, our society—locally, nationally and globally—finds itself in crisis, embroiled in increasingly contentious and combative approaches to dispute resolution. My wish for you, as my students, my friends and my colleagues, is that you never hesitate to choose the path of kindness, compassion, caring and peacemaking in your approach to your professional endeavors; that you seek to introduce reason, even in the midst of seeming chaos, and love, even in the face of significant adversity. On a journey that will offer many competing paths, where the road before you will often diverge, always ask: Which is the way of love? Which is the honorable course? Choose that road. The decision to do so, repeatedly exercised, will go on to transform for the better the shape of our profession, far more than any courtroom or boardroom victory ever could.

It will not be easy. In the days and years ahead, there will be times of darkness, despair and disenchantment, when you will question yourself, your colleagues, our legal system and its sometimes seeming insensitivity to the aims of justice and virtue. At times, you will feel like an island. We are told, and all too often taught, that manipulation, aggression, control and domination are what it takes to succeed. Your gentleness will sometimes be

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mistaken for weakness. But you will know better. And by your example, you will teach others. Always remember that cruelty comes from the weak. Gentleness is to be expected only from the strong.

The challenge ahead of you transcends any of the more immediate hurdles that I know you will surmount. The true challenge for the years to come is to hold tight to your ideals, to your goodness, to your commitment to exalting—by words and deeds—the gentler virtues. There are risks involved. To place one's ideals before the group is to risk criticism and ridicule. To act in furtherance of those ideals is to risk pain and disappointment. But risks must be taken. To cower as a consequence of the assessments of others or because of self-defeating thoughts is to surrender all that you are. You cannot ever let that happen. You are much too talented and there is too much to be done.

There is an ancient proverb that says, "To get to the fruit of the tree, you've got to go out on a limb." Get out there on that limb and dare to make a difference. Know that below you is a formidable and secure safety net, composed of the arms, outstretched and interlocked, of all who love you, who respect you, and who stand tall and strong and ready—ready to catch you if and when you sometimes fall. Count me among those people, all of whom are with you now, whether in body or in spirit. Your family and friends, who have so much to do with your being here today, will always be there for you. Today, they are seated right behind you, or they are watching over you. Cherish them, treasure them, love them with all your heart. And when they leave this place and time, know that they will always reside within you, because love does not die.

Relish the terrific possibilities and responsibilities of our craft. Cultivate the highest standards of professionalism. A professional stance requires recognition and appreciation of the privilege that has been afforded you, together with acceptance of its attendant obligations. Professionalism depends upon your establishing an honorable and sacred trust with your clients, with the community and with one another. These relationships will require public service, pride in your work, self-respect and respect for all others.

In sum, embrace your calling. Endeavor to make justice a reality for all people. Live the words of George Bernard Shaw, who said, "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die. For, the harder I work, the more I live. I rejoice in life for its own sake.

Life is no short candle for me. It is, instead, a splendid torch, which I have in my hands for this brief moment. I must make it burn as brightly as possible, before I hand it to the future.”

Today, that torch is in your precious hands. It will burn brightly, as you accomplish all that you will and all that you must. As you do, please remember:

People are sometimes mean and cruel and irresponsible. Love them anyway.

What you build today may be torn down tomorrow. Build it anyway.

If you commit to goodness and to the way of love, you may be accused of false piety. Commit to goodness anyway.

If you endeavor to help others, you may be resented for it. Help anyway.

And if you give the world the best that you have got, striving to serve the nobler ends of justice and fairness, you may feel pain in the process. Give it your all anyway.¹

This, beautiful class of 1991, is your imperative. It is your mission, and I know that it will be your legacy. You have struggled too long and too hard to get here today and you have succeeded. You will attain the best, because you are the best.

Thus, we come to this last occasion in which I have the privilege and the pleasure of addressing you collectively. With all of the respect and admiration that one person could feel for another, I send you off, to do well, and also, to do good. In that pursuit, continue to be good to one another. Help each other. Love each other. I love you, and I thank you for gracing my life.

I will not say goodbye to you today. This is not a time for farewells. There is too much to look forward to and too many occasions, in the years ahead, when together we will rejoice in your many successes and achievements. Instead of goodbye, then, I offer you a word of greeting, shared between friends in many cultures of the world. The word is *Namaste*, and it is spoken with arms open and outstretched. It means: Although we now part, I go to and I honor that place where there is no distance between us, that place, in my heart, where you are part of me, and I am part of you. My students, my friends, and, today, my esteemed colleagues, *Namaste*.

¹ These reflections are loosely quoted from a passage which the author believes was associated with the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. Despite extensive research, no accurate citation could be found.