

In the Company of Lawyers



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I have been a lawyer for nearly 20 years. Until I came to work for the State Bar of Michigan seven years ago, I had no clue why lawyers would spend any of their precious free time in bar association activities, much less take on the copious burdens of bar leadership. Outside work, my time was fully consumed with the tasks and pleasures of parenting, the compulsive but necessary nourishment of reading for pleasure or understanding, and relishing the good company of friends, many of whom, coincidentally, were lawyers who, like me, had never joined a local bar association or served on a State Bar committee. An exception was my indefatigable friend Fred Baker, who at a tender professional age had assumed the helm of the State Bar's Bar Journal Advisory Board (now the Publications and Website Advisory Committee), and has proven to be such a natural for the job that he has not been allowed to step down for several decades. I knew that Fred derived great satisfaction from his Bar work, which has morphed over the years from the "simple" job of providing editorial guidance for the *Michigan Bar Journal* to the gargantuan task of leading the editorial advice for all of the State Bar's publications, including its website. But Fred is such an extraordinary character, an endless source of seemingly effortless energy and ideas, that it never occurred to me to draw any lessons from his example, and so I persisted in my abstinence from all bar activities of any kind, other than the ritual paying of my bar dues at the last permissible moment.

Fed by vague visions of argumentative committee meetings, bar wonks, and interminable chicken dinner banquets, my working assumption during those years was that involvement in bar activities would dissipate my somewhat limited stores of profes-

sional energy and patience with my fellow lawyers. After all, the typical daily working life of a lawyer consists of solving problems and resolving conflict, and our chief adversaries, other than ourselves, are other lawyers. The words of other lawyers, either directly or in the form of briefs, letters, and opinions, fill our heads throughout the day. Wasn't that more than enough interaction with my fellow lawyers, I figured?

Had I not come to work for the State Bar and witnessed firsthand the experience of State Bar leaders and local bar members throughout the state, I might have persisted in my misguided stereotypes and conclusions. One of the standard lines used to recruit lawyers to bar association involvement is that it is a great source of professional contacts and advancement—which it is. What I've learned, however, is that there's an even better reason for lawyers to participate in bar activities. It turns out that being in the company of lawyers—working together to uphold the values of our profession, telling war stories, and exchanging tricks of the trade—is a tremendous source of professional succor, inspiration, and renewal, as well as a deeply satisfying pleasure.

Over the course of the last year, I have had the honor of being a guest at events of the Washtenaw, Italian-American, Wolverine, Oakland, Hispanic, Ingham, Kent, women's, and federal bar associations. I've listened to a newly minted Arab-American

lawyer describe what she hopes to achieve for her family and community through the practice of law. I've heard lawyers who have been members of the Bar for 50 years reminisce with great eloquence about their careers. I've participated in parties for retiring jurists at which the flow of humorous stories and high spirits rival the most rollicking Broadway entertainment. I've heard the mayor of Detroit bring a crowd of lawyers repeatedly to their feet as he exhorted his fellow lawyers to walk in the footsteps of the legendary Damon Keith. I've watched members of State Bar committees, such as the task forces on attorney-client privilege and the recording of custodial interrogations, seize issues of great import to our profession and produce exceptional work, forging friendships and alliances along the way.

My favorite moment at these bar events, including the State Bar Annual Meeting, is the recognition of fellow lawyers for their outstanding contributions in public service or as role models of civility. Hearing about the contributions of lawyers like Norm Fell, the head of Thomas M. Cooley Law School's Innocence Project, is a sure-fire antidote to pessimism and cynicism about the profession. And I've never seen a winner of a civility award whose accepting remarks don't immediately reveal to everyone why he or she won the award in the first place. Who knew that wit and charm are apparently essential ingredients of exemplary professional civility?

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There are a hundred different theories about why civility among lawyers has declined. Here's mine. "Back in the day," our senior lawyers report, having heard about it from their grandparents, professional courtesy and respect were the norm. Back in the day, of course, you knew all the lawyers in town, their spouses, their pets, their ailments, their vacation plans, their secretaries, their wants, and their needs. And they knew you. Together, you welcomed the new kid lawyer on the block warmly, and indoctrinated him (almost always a "him" back then) into the culture of the local bar. Even further back, lawyers rode circuit, roomed together on the road, and gathered in public taverns to entertain one another with the only available distraction—themselves. Instant bar association.

These were the conditions that Abraham Lincoln described as the happiest days of his life. A story from his circuit-riding days illustrates why:

It was Court week in Bloomington in 1857. A case had been finished and a recess ordered by Judge Davis. Lamon and several of the attorneys adjourned to the courthouse yard for a bit of air. Soon a wrestling match was arranged between the prosecutor and a visiting lawyer. Off came their coats—they clinched, struggled, tore up the sod—and then there was a "down" with Lamon on top. Then as Lamon strained to force his adversary's shoulders to the earth as a token of victory, the seam of his trousers gave way. At that moment the next case was called and there was not time to change the garment. Donning his long-tailed coat he strode into the courtroom and resumed his duties. All went well for a time, and then in a forgetful moment he stooped to the floor to recover a document. The secret was out. A brother attorney, seeing his predicament, hastily prepared a subscription paper for funds to purchase a new pair of trousers for the prosecutor. The attorneys offered various ridiculous amounts until it reached Lincoln. He slowly wiped his spectacles, and after a careful reading, wrote: "I can contribute nothing to the end in view. —A. Lincoln."¹

Bar association today does not typically offer such lively physical diversions as Lincoln experienced; golf not holding a candle to spontaneous wrestling, it still has its compensations. In an age when lawyering too often consists of being on call by e-mail 24 hours a day, and interactions with opposing counsel can have all the warmth and civility of a drive-by shooting, it's easy to forget that opposing counsel is a fellow human being and not an impersonal force to be overcome at any cost. If too little knowledge of one another is a cause of growing incivility, the company of lawyers is a cure.

If you have not yet experienced the benefits of bar involvement, don't be concerned, as I was, that you are not suited for it. Litigators, transactors, endomorphs, ectomorphs, Sagittarians, Aquarians, extroverts, introverts, hipsters, and nerds all have their place in the bar world, often working against stereotype. GenXers are notorious for not wanting to be involved in professional activities outside work hours, yet our award-winning Young Lawyers Section is among the most active, creative, and productive sections, known not only for its pro bono

leadership, but also for unsurpassed social events. Elderly baby boomers are known as "late adopters" of technology, but you'll find several aging boomers leading technology discussions on section listservs, tossing off tech tips as if they were candy.

In the company of lawyers, you will find all types, including your own. Hate committee meetings? Become a mentor, or throw yourself into the rush of listserv traffic. Hate travel? Have we got a conference call number for you! Love writing? There are unborn newsletter articles waiting in bar sections to be birthed.

On the State Bar website you can find contact information and links to local and specialty bars, and information about State Bar committees and sections. If you've not yet taken the plunge into the bar world, come on in. Company's waiting. ■

FOOTNOTE

1. Browne, Francis Fisher, *The Every-day Life of Abraham Lincoln: A Narrative and Descriptive Biography with Pen-Pictures and Personal Recollections by Those Who Knew Him* (Chicago: Browne & Howell Co, 1913), p 157.