

Remembering an Old-Fashioned Lawyer

By Lawrence M. Knowles

This past November, my father-in-law, Richard H. Morris of Kalamazoo, passed away after a long, largely peaceful decline through the shadows of Alzheimer's disease. Before the disease deprived him of his keen intellect and steady demeanor, Dick had practiced law in Kalamazoo for half a century, with a firm that for many of those years was known as Fox, Thompson, Morris & Stover. Because I am also a lawyer, my wife's family asked if I might say a few words at the memorial service, reflecting on Dick's life in the law.

The invitation gave me an opportunity to honor a man I admired, respected, and liked. It was easy to catalogue virtues whose recollection would be appropriate to such an occasion, and I had no need to polish or enhance the memory of my father-in-law to an unnatural sheen. Richard Morris brought qualities to the practice of law that would have stood out in any generation, chief among them his integrity. But thinking about the man I had gotten to know over a quarter century, I realized that I had learned from him several important lessons about what it could and perhaps should mean to be a lawyer in our society, lessons that are not evident in the practice as I have experienced it.

It was not immediately apparent when I got married that sharing a profession with one's father-in-law would be a good thing. I was still in law school, and it made me a little uneasy to find out that my prospective father-in-law had studied the AV ratings and Martindale-Hubbell listing of the firm I planned to clerk for the summer I was to marry his youngest daughter, something he continued to do as I made my way through the legal profession. But Dick Morris was not a judgmental man, merely curi-

ous. Over the years, our common profession made possible an easy familiarity that other members of the family did not always enjoy. Dick and I could talk about work without having to explain peculiarities that non-lawyers wouldn't understand. It's the same with almost any profession.

Whenever I spoke with my father-in-law about his work, I was struck by an attitude that I do not encounter in the lawyers I deal with on a daily basis, an attitude I don't often find in myself. As he described the challenges of a client's predicament, a tricky regulatory scheme he was navigating, or a troubled business relationship he was trying to sort out, I realized that Dick believed that lawyers have a positive contribution to make to their clients and to the community in general. Dick believed the world was a better, more orderly, fairer, even more just place because of the work he did. I, like many lawyers my age and younger, seem to have internalized the popular view that lawyers are, at best, a necessary evil; at worst, parasites eating away at the fabric of the body politic. Those of us who have any conscience at all (as I think most in the profession still do) approach our work with a sheepish guilt. I envied my father-in-law's belief in the intrinsic value of his profession and his work. I still do.

My father-in-law understood that the law is a collective process of negotiation, interpretation, adjustment, and problem solving, carried out within a principled framework applying high standards of intellectual rigor and moral probity. I don't think Dick saw himself as *having* the answers; he saw himself as part of that process that would find the answers, and he believed that the better he and everyone else did their jobs, the better the answers would be. His pride in his work and his belief in the value of his contribution to the community grew out of that pride in the legal profession as a whole and his belief in its indispensable contribution to the workings of our society.

There are many memories of my father-in-law that I will treasure and many lessons and examples that I expect to carry with me in my professional and personal life. But if there were just one thing I could take from his life to share with future generations of lawyers, it would be that sense of worth, that faith in the value of the legal profession, and an understanding of what is required to earn it, both for an individual lawyer and for the profession as a whole. ■

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