

The "Electric Cord" That Unites Us as Lawyers



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On September 26, I took the oath of office as incoming president of the State Bar of Michigan and had the distinct honor of delivering inaugural remarks to a few hundred lawyers who had gathered for the SBM Inaugural & Awards Luncheon. Since those present accounted for only a small percentage of the lawyers I am now privileged to lead for the next year, I thought I'd take the opportunity here to share those remarks with the Bar's 46,000+ members. Following is the text of my inaugural remarks (lightly edited for length).

I've been to many of these inaugural luncheons over the years and I've heard many eloquent speeches, all from women and men who speak for a living and are pretty darned good at their craft. Naturally, I want to live up to the high standards set by my predecessors. But when I received the agenda and saw that I've only been allotted 10 minutes to talk, I became worried that 10 minutes may not be sufficient to say all the things that so many important people have gathered to hear me say.

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The truth is, the opportunity to hear me speak is not the reason we have all gathered here today. And I think it's worth taking a few minutes to consider just why we are here.

Abraham Lincoln did much the same thing while speaking to a crowd in Chicago on July 10, 1858. In the middle of a political speech, he stopped to talk about the significance of the recent 4th of July gatherings that had become so popular. Lincoln thought it was important to consider the "uses" of such gatherings and said, "If you will indulge me, I will state what I suppose to be some of them."¹

Lincoln then proceeded to deliver what has since become known as his "electric cord" speech—one of the most compact and lovely explanations of the remarkable nature of the United States that I'm aware of, and one that remains timely in these divisive times. He began by describing how big and prosperous the country had become, and how it all traced back to the founding generation, people who "fought for the principle that they were contending for," and, more importantly, how it all traced back to the Declaration of Independence which embodied that principle.

Here's what Lincoln said:

We hold this annual celebration to remind ourselves of all the good done in this process of time of how it was done

and who did it, and how we are historically connected with it; and we go from these meetings in better humor with ourselves—we feel more attached the one to the other, and more firmly bound to the country we inhabit... But after we have done all this we have not yet reached the whole. There is something else connected with it. We have besides these men—descended by blood from our ancestors—among us perhaps half our people who are not descendants at all of these men, . . . whose ancestors have come hither and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back through this history to trace their connection with those days by blood, they find they have none, they cannot carry themselves back into that glorious epoch and make themselves feel that they are part of us, but when they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,*" and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that

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will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world. (Emphasis added.)²

I'm not here to give a political speech, as did Lincoln. Nor would I presume that I'd be up to the task of writing or delivering one as Lincoln could. But I do think it is important for us to consider, as he did, why we gather and what we are doing here today. What is the "electric cord" that unites those of us gathered here today, makes us feel more attached "the one to the other" and to our past, and what is it that we are celebrating?

I submit that we are here to celebrate our profession, and the connection that links us as lawyers is nothing less than our shared commitment to serving the public. This is true both for the State Bar of Michigan as an organization and for each of the individual lawyers here today. And this is well worth celebrating.

We also have an "old document" that evidences our relationship to each other, to our predecessors, and with those we serve. I refer to the Michigan Rules of Professional Conduct. The Preamble notes that "[a] lawyer is a representative of clients, an officer of the legal system and a public citizen having special responsibility for the quality of justice." It also reminds us that lawyers are part of a learned profession with unique obligations over and above the important responsibility of representing clients, which itself is a public service. As public citizens, it says lawyers should:

- seek to improve the law;
- seek to improve the administration of justice and the quality of service rendered by the legal profession;
- be mindful that the poor, and sometimes persons who are not poor, cannot afford adequate legal assistance, so lawyers should devote professional time and civic influence on their behalf; and
- aid the legal profession in pursuing these objectives and help the bar regulate itself in the public interest.

Consistent with our professional responsibilities to society, we lawyers share a common commitment to preserving the rule of law. We should be rightly proud of these responsibilities, as they speak to the gravity

of our vocation and the nobility of our profession. And we can also share a pride in the successes of our system of justice, so long as we do not fail to acknowledge its shortcomings and honor our commitment to the much-needed work of continuing to make it better.

We gather every year at this time for a transition, but this is a transition of leadership, not a transition of our mission. In the coming year, you should expect your State Bar leadership to remain true to our core mission of promoting those things, and helping lawyers do those things they are called to do as public citizens.

The State Bar is doing so many good things, and doing them so well, that it is tempting to say there is no need to reinvent the wheel. But be assured, we are constantly looking for ways to make the wheel faster and more efficient. You might have noticed some changes to the format of this year's Annual Meeting. We implemented these changes and streamlined the meeting to economize and to more effectively use the funds available to us. Through the SBM's Governance Task Force, we are evaluating ways to streamline the State Bar's governance structure and scope with a view toward improving its efficiency and effectiveness, enhancing member engagement, and furthering the SBM's ability to fulfill its mission. I'd like to lead that project to completion this year, so by this time next year, I hope the SBM will look and be more effective, efficient, and economical for our members and the public we serve.

It has very much been an honor and a privilege for me to have participated in and now to lead the extraordinary work that has already been done toward our mission. I'd like to begin my work and conclude my remarks by acknowledging and thanking a few of the people who have been critical to this mission and have helped make today possible.

I would first like to thank Chief Justice Bridget McCormack for being here this afternoon, especially to administer the oath of office to SBM officers. We all know you have a busy schedule, and we appreciate your taking time to be with us today.

Thank you also for your leadership and the Supreme Court's leadership on an important issue facing our profession: access

to justice. The Court's Justice for All Taskforce, with Justice Brian Zahra leading the effort, is but one of many examples of the Court's leadership in working to make sure low- and moderate-income people have full access to our civil justice system. You have helped focus attention on an important set of issues and are helping marshal resources to address them. This work is timely and important. Thank you, Chief Justice.

As I look out, I see elected officials, justices, judges, bar association leaders, and scores of other public citizens—fellow lawyers. Thank you all for being here and for your shared commitment to the public we serve.

I'd like to congratulate Jennifer Grieco on a fantastic year as president. On behalf of all the lawyers across Michigan, thank you for your endless energy, compassion, wisdom, and superb leadership in service to the public. You deserve a rest, but I know you too well to expect that to happen.

I'd like also to give a special thanks to my law firm, Barris, Sott, Denn & Driker, for allowing me to take on the responsibilities of the SBM presidency. I could not do this without your complete support. And I would not be here but for the great partners, mentors, colleagues, and staff at BSDD, who are all fully committed to public service in general and to this effort in particular.

Let me conclude by again reminding everyone that we do not gather to celebrate the president of the SBM or simply to hear me speak; we gather to celebrate that "electric cord" that unites us as lawyers—our common dedication to the public good. To the extent there are accolades for the outgoing or incoming State Bar presidents, it is what she has done toward the public good and what he will do to unite the rest of us toward that public good—that's what we celebrate. The legal profession is a learned one, and being a lawyer is a calling. Thank you for accepting the call. Thank you for joining in this mission. Now let's get back to work. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Basler, ed, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Vol. II) (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), pp 499–500.
2. *Id.*