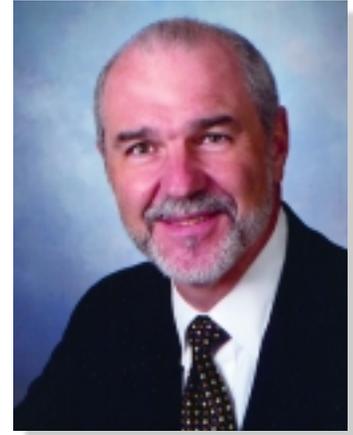


Pass It On (or Thanks, Brother Neil—Wherever You Are)

What a strange gift life is. If it is preserved jealously and selfishly, it impoverishes and saddens. But if it is spent for others, it enriches and beautifies.

—Ignazio Silone



by Joseph A. Condo 2000–2001 VSB President

Even though it was almost 40 years ago, I can feel the electricity of the moment as if it were last week. A roomful of 20 or so freshmen, still unsure of what to make of the high school experience, wait for their first English class. The teacher walks into the classroom, and every one of us can feel the energy. He is a member of an order of religious brothers that runs this Catholic prep school. Though he looks to be barely into his twenties, his demeanor is all confidence: smooth, sharp, well-spoken, self-assured to the point of cockiness. And he is intense—very intense. In this first class, he demonstrates the power of an expanded vocabulary by showing us the limitations of the word “great”—“That movie was *great!*” “Gee, Mom, you’re *great!*” “You did a *great* job!” This was the beginning of my three years of instruction in writing, vocabulary and literature by Brother Neil Gilligan. His excitement and enthusiasm for our language, and for the limitless possibilities open to those who become skilled at using it, practically came out of his pores. It was contagious. I caught it. Happily, I have never recovered.

I was also indelibly affected by Ed Conan. Ed was my constitutional law professor in college. In addition to his teaching, he was a practicing attorney, part-time U.S. Magistrate and the faculty advisor to the student government association. Ed loved the law and loved practicing law, and it showed. He also loved people. He took a special interest in me, and I learned things from him about the legal profession that I never could have learned any other way. From watching him, I figured out that being a successful lawyer involved more than learning the law and becoming skilled at practicing it. Ed Conan taught me that a lawyer’s humanity and ability to make connections with other human beings was an essential part of the picture, and he was one of my earliest lawyer role models.

There is a young man who has been working in my office for ten years, since his senior year in high school. Over those years, what began as an employer-employee relationship has blossomed into a mentorship and a friendship, and this spring he completed law school and will be an associate in our firm. One night, when we were having a beer after work, he reminded me of a brief chat we’d had some years back, in which I talked about how much I enjoyed my life in the law. I had no recollection of it, but my passion for the law must have come through in that conversation: He referred to it as “the chat that changed my life.”

I recount these vignettes neither as a tribute to the individuals who so profoundly affected my life (deserving though they are), nor to seek credit for my apparent effect on the life of my young friend. Rather, it is to illustrate a simple point.

Just as many people have affected our lives in lasting and meaningful ways, we lawyers are in a unique position to have significant and positive effects on the lives of virtually everyone we touch. We are a highly gifted lot. For one thing, I think we acquire greater judgment and wisdom, and at an earlier age, than people in just about every other walk of life. It’s easy to understand why. Practicing law consists almost entirely of solving human problems in one way or another. We see at close hand (and presumably learn from) the kinds of misjudgments and unwise choices that have caused our clients’ problems. I’ve also observed that an exceptional number of people who are drawn to the law as a career possess extraordinary talents. I’m speaking here about innate, unteachable traits, like the ability to relate well to and inspire other people, to instruct, to explain, to educate, to discern the things in life that are really important.

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In one sense, we get these wonderful and uncommon gifts for free. But in truth they aren’t free at all. They carry an obligation. They are meant to be shared. They are meant to be passed on. For those of us who have the ability to enrich the existence of others, it is simply wrong to fail to do so. Likewise, when we’ve learned some of life’s most important lessons through painful experience—or watched others do so—how can we not share this knowledge with the young and the uninitiated, to spare them this pain when they pass the same way?

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I don't know if Brother Neil and Ed Conan consciously set out to make a difference in the lives of those they touched. But I do know that in choosing to be educators and mentors each must have felt, on some level, an obligation to pass his special gifts along to those who followed.

This ideal is expressed in an eloquent way by the inscription on the headstone of the late baseball player Jackie Robinson. Even though Robinson's career included countless athletic records and milestones, and the unique contribution he made to the civil rights struggle by breaking the color line in professional sports, his grave marker bears no reference to these enormous accomplishments. Instead, it says simply:

A life has no importance except in the impact it has on other lives.

This should be a guiding precept for not only our legal careers, but for our lives. For, in the end, what will resonate, what will have meaning, and what will truly endure won't be how many cases were won. It won't be the elegant briefs, airtight contracts, well-crafted trusts, or crisp exhibits we labored over. It won't be how many hours were billed, or how much money was made. It will be, as Jackie Robinson's epitaph says, the impact each of us has had on other lives.

How you do this is for you to determine. Our lives as lawyers present us with countless opportunities to change and improve the lives of others. So do our communities. You can tutor a young person. You can be a Big Sister or Big Brother. You can be a mentor to a young attorney. You can be a resource to less experienced lawyers in your practice area. You know what you have to offer; the possibilities of what you can do with it are limited only by your imagination.

Some time ago, I composed a thank-you letter to Brother Neil, but the letter has never been sent. I haven't been able to track him down, even through the Internet. I don't intend to stop trying. Ed Conan, on the other hand, passed away before I had the chance to tell him what a difference he made—and still makes—in my life. This brings me to the second part of this message. I'd guess that most of us who have been around a while remem-

ber lawyers or judges who took the time early in our professional lives to give us direction, help us out of a legal or ethical dilemma, or serve as a sounding board when we needed one. I know my own life and career have been immeasurably aided and enriched by people like this. But I wonder how many of us have thought to let these people know we are grateful for the gifts they have given to us.

The late Leo Buscaglia frequently spoke of how most of us live our lives constantly thinking about tomorrow, when none of us knows how many tomorrows we or those around us will have. He encouraged us to thank those who have given us guidance, or gone out of their way for us, or done us a kindness, or had an impact on our lives. He knew that those whom we love and care about need to hear it, that we should never assume that they know it. Too often, he said, we put off expressing our affection, admiration or gratitude until it is too late. Buscaglia once illustrated this thought with a poem a young woman sent to him entitled, "Things You Didn't Do." Here is part of that poem:

*Remember the day I borrowed your brand new car and dented it?
I thought you'd kill me, but you didn't.*

*Do you remember the time I flirted with all the guys to make you
jealous, and you were?
I thought you'd leave me, but you didn't.*

*And remember the time I forgot to tell you the dance was formal
and you showed up in jeans?
I thought you'd drop me, but you didn't.*

*Yes, there were lots of things you didn't do.
There were lots of things I wanted to make up to you when you
returned from Viet Nam.
But you didn't.*

It is no coincidence that I have chosen these themes for my final message to you. It is hard to imagine a more important message with which to leave you. Turn to those who have made a difference in your life, and tell them how much it means to you—now, before it's too late. And whatever gift life has bestowed upon you—a talent, an insight, knowledge, experience—pass it on. ☺

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