

President's Message

by Leonard C. Heath Jr.



The Power of Words

THIS ISSUE OF *Virginia Lawyer* is dedicated to our Diversity Conference. Our bench and bar must reflect the rich diversity of our community in order to function properly and maintain the public trust. For this, and countless other reasons, the Virginia State Bar celebrates diversity. We live in a time when diverse ideological camps seem more polarized than ever. Yet, viewed in the context of history, this is really not the case. America has always been a crossroads of competing ideas and ideals. The evolution of our democratic experiment requires orderly, open, honest, and respectful debate and critical evaluation of widely varying viewpoints. By their nature, debate and evaluation involve words.

Words are powerful. Beautifully crafted, they can transfix and energize. They can convince a people to abandon their roots and join a revolutionary cause, separating them from the most powerful country in the world. We sometimes forget how, at the time, the words penned by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence were considered radical, dangerous, and treasonous. But ultimately, Jefferson's words were a masterful expression of the American spirit that ushered in the birth of a nation.

Words can solemnly, yet beautifully, honor those who have fallen on the field of battle. Abraham Lincoln was an exceptional wordsmith, both when addressing crowds or when focusing

ever so compassionately on a single individual. In his Gettysburg Address, Lincoln eloquently conveyed both the grief of a nation and its commitment to endure. At the other end of the audience-spectrum, Lincoln's personal letter to Lydia Bixby, probably best recalled from the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, touches the human soul. Faced with the impossible task of trying to

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console Mrs. Bixby for the loss of her sons during the Civil War, Lincoln expertly crafted:

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

The most magnificent orators have been able to mobilize a language and send it into battle, as Winston Churchill did before the House of Commons on June 4, 1940. At a time when England was the sole remaining bastion of the free world in Europe, and the English army had narrowly escaped obliteration at Dunkirk,

Churchill single-handedly and *solely with words* inspired a nation to carry on. In his speech, he made abundantly clear that England would never surrender and would fight to the end. Churchill's words steered the resolve of the British empire.

And then there are the words that, by their mere arrangement, evoke emotion. Poems by the likes

of Whitman, Dickinson, and Frost can take us to places we never knew existed. Who can forget Maya Angelou's reading of "On the Pulse of Morning" at

President Clinton's inauguration. The flow of the words was so mesmerizing as we wrapped our brains around the message of hope. Here is a passage:

I, the rock, I the river, I the tree
I am yours – your passages have been paid.
Lift up your faces, you have a piercing need
For this bright morning dawning for you.
History, despite its wrenching pain,
Cannot be unlived, and if faced with courage,
Need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream.

Words continued on page 17

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But few have understood and perfected the power of words in the sound of one melodious voice like Martin Luther King Jr. While it took a war to end the scourge of slavery, it took Dr. King's words, ideas, and bravery to transform a nation, peacefully, but no less forcefully. Simple words are sometimes the most enduring:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

These words are not a black message or a white message . . . they are an American message.

As attorneys, we are wordsmiths, orators, leaders, and role models. We must

be exquisitely mindful and aware of the fact that *words matter*. As American lawyers we are entrusted with, and bound by, a sacred societal obligation to inculcate this concept into others. Words can inspire, console, motivate, or compel to action. But they can also denigrate and demoralize. Words are powerful. Use them wisely.

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