A Grand Notion for Power-Center Lawyers

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A Grand Notion for Power-Center Lawyers

By Porcher L. Taylor

Lawyers of so many administrations before them, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, both lawyers, surrounded themselves with a sea of newly minted lawyers—turned-political advisors and policy baroquers. Some would argue that lawyers and politics are a bad brew. But lawyers like lawyers. And it would seem that lawyers are so much that some will steadfastly defend their political bosses, even if that means being key players in the potential cover-up of a crime. In their skewed minds, accusations of crimes by leaders of the opposing political party are merely biased power politics.

The result: bold and immediate invocation of executive privilege and other spurious presidential perquisites in this context is par for the course. Yet such arrogance by those so intimately know and control the law can breed public contempt.

Several Nixon inner-circle lawyers served prison terms and were disbarred or received painful and shameful professional discipline. Nixon preempted his own disbarment with a resignation before congressional impeachment hearings ran their course.

There's a sober lesson here for Clinton, his inner circle and all lawyers who have long held a veritable monopoly on influential positions in the White House, on Capitol Hill and in corporate America.

After the Watergate scandal in 1974, the American Bar Association worked with law schools to place increased emphasis on professional ethics and conduct.

The Watergate taint, due to the bad acts of an unscrupulous president and his Praetorian Guard that happened to have law degrees, had to be immediately purged from the profession before it spread throughout like a cancer.

Now, following the special prosecutor's report on the Clinton sex scandal, there should be a call for law schools to create and teach a permanent course on leadership studies with a focus on moral responsibility. In the same "pervasive professionalism" vein, continuing legal education for lawyers should include a leadership studies component.

Consultative wisdom, professional leadership can be taught and learned. Two influential books on leadership studies should be on every lawyer's and aspiring lawyer's personal bookshelf:

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Lincoln on Leadership: Executive Strategies for Tough Times and "Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness." These works constitute a case study in some of the core professional values that sometimes seem elusive in our profession: civility, ethics and service to the public.

Both of these classics continue to be best sellers because of their practical application of selfless leadership principles and doctrines to today's complex world.

As for lawyers, state bars should grant up to four hours of continuing education credit for these lawyers who certify that they have read at least one of these books. Such an incentive for those in the legal profession to scrutinize leadership would demonstrate the bar's serious commitment to the academic and practical study of this discipline.

He Was Out to Lunch During Discipline Lesson

A rabbi was telling me that by this afternoon noon he'll be light-headed and feeling a little weak from having fasted since yesterday at sundown, when Yom Kippur began.

He wasn't boasting about his asceticism. He knew from 40 years of Yom Kippur fasts, the rabbi confided, that physical hunger would concentrate his spirit on the question a penitent poses to himself on this most solemn Jewish holy day.

What have I done with the past year? Where am I now in my life? What will I do with the future? It's too bad that I can't fast like the rabbi, because this Christian sinner could benefit from what Jesus calls hashanah hasefachah — an inventory of the soul. Catholics like myself call it an examination of conscience, a personal audit through past failures and sins, but undoubtedly it's not so productive without abstaining from food, as devout Jews do on Yom Kippur.

Why can't I fast? Is it because I'm sick or something? No. I can't fast because, when God was dispensing willpower, it seems I was out to lunch.

Severe light-headedness would overtake this faint-hearted believer by mid-morning, and I'd never make it past noon without a couple of bran muffins and a large black coffee to stem off swooning.

Still, as a highly respectful observer, I hope to gain some grace from the spirit of blessed Yom Kippur, at the outset of a new year of faith for the Jewish people. The sacred Day of Atonement arrives amid frantic politics and baseball to remind our worldly selves to put our souls first on what compulsions and diversions clamor for our attention.

Does faith work? I think of a dear friend, Saul Bennett. Four years ago on Yom Kippur I quoted Saul saying plaintively, "How will I get through the Kol Nidre?" That's the cantor's melody at the evening Yom Kippur service, recalling the history of the people, their bleeding sins and prayers for atonement. The pain of Saul's passing was unrelenting when they would drag himself to Temple Isaiah of Great Neck to pur out his agony, rage at the Almighty and pray for a ray of hope. He was afraid the moving Kol Nidre would plunge him into despair.

Around that time something — divine intervention, maybe? — moved him to write out his grief. Saul, a public relations man, became a poet. He hadn't written a poem since he was a boy at P.S. 150 in Sunnyside, Queens, in the 1940s. But now poems, inspired by Saul, poured out of Saul. They brimmed with life and revitalized him. He felt in a state of grace when he wrote, as though taking dictation from a Higher Authority. There was a spiritual dimension to the verse. A liberal Protestant publication, The Christian Century, published an early poem and a conservative Christian monthly, First Things, published another.

And in books of them, "New Fields and Other Stones," subtitled, "On a Child's Death," was published last week by Anchor Books. Yesterday, at home in upstate Woodstock, where he and his wife, Joan, moved after he retired last year from a Manhattan public relations company, Saul was saying that he would be especially gratified if his poems provided some comfort to mourners grieving the untimely loss of loved ones. Those would give meaning to his suffering, he said.

Some grief runs too deep to be gotten over, but it can be transcended. That's presumably where God helps. Last night, Saul said, he would be at a Woodstock Jewish congregation, inventing his soul on Yom Kippur, as Jews have been doing for thousands of years. What an impressive record of keeping the faith! Our other brothers in belief are an inspiration even to Christians like me who can't keep a fast.