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A Grand Notion for Power-Center Lawyers

Porcher L. Taylor III

University of Richmond, ptaylor@richmond.edu

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By Porcher L. Taylor

LIKE LEADERS of so many administrations before them, Richard Nixon and Bill Clinton, both lawyers, surrounded themselves with a cadre mainly of lawyers—turned-political advisers and policy bureaucrats. Some would argue that lawyers and politics are a bad brew. But lawyers like lawyers. And it would seem that lawyers want 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 who 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 pre-empted 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 Praetorium 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 profession- alism” vein, continuing legal education for lawyers should include a leadership studies component.

Conversely, 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:

Porcher L. Taylor, a lawyer and senior associate at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, teaches law and leadership at the University of Richmond. Lawrence C. Levy’s column will appear Thursday.

`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 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 hirnspirit 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 sure could benefit from what Jews call heshbon hanefesh — an inventory of the soul. Catholics like myself call it an examination of conscience, a life review through the lens of faith, but undoubtedly it’s not so productive without abstinence 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 stave 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 no matter 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 asking plaintively, “How will I get through the Kol Nidre?” That’s the cantor’s melody at the evening Yom Kippur service, reciting the history of the Jewish people and the people of God, purging through penitence.

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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 older brothers in belief are an inspiration even to Christians like me who can’t keep a fast.