



Why the Law?

By Linda Northrup

I first entered a Courtroom as a lawyer almost thirty years ago. Since then, I have always known that I chose the greatest profession in the world, particularly for me. I remain energized and engaged; there is no “burn out” in sight even after many years of late nights, emergency motions, difficult clients, less than civil opposing counsel and the never ending quest for a “balanced life.” Why? Lately this is something I have pondered. I have had trouble articulating a largely visceral reaction that I would never want to do anything else and finding adequate words to explain the thrill I feel each time I get to tackle a thorny legal problem and work my way toward the solution. As I thought about this in recent months, the words to express the “why” always eluded me.

Then, I got the monthly email blast from my high school drama teacher, Jim Gilchrist. He always intersperses pithy quotes with the updates from our various classmates and teachers now scattered around the globe. I read the missives religiously as much for the inspiration as for the news. Recently, one of the quotes set my fingers flying. It was from Elisabeth Niebuhr Sifton, the daughter of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (author of the Serenity Prayer), and she said, “[A]ll the goodwill in the world gets you nowhere unless governmental intervention brings the proper legal sanctions to bear. Civil society needs a rule of law even more than it needs compassionate priests.”

There it was, the “why,” in a few short words, distilled to its essence. I was immediately taken back to a conversation I had years ago with a relatively new lawyer who had been with my litigation practice for only a few months.

“Everyone’s always so angry and hostile,” she said. “I really don’t like all of this contentiousness all of the time, how do you handle it?” She was genuinely and deeply distressed.

I sat down across from her, “You need to understand that this is really civilized war. We intentionally interject ourselves into peoples’ disputes. That is our role, to help them sort things out and get the dispute behind them, one way or another, within the bounds of the law. In the course of that endeavor, missiles will be fired and some may land in your back yard. There needs to be an intensity and a detachment at the same time. It is not an easy balancing act to master.”

She left the firm with my blessing and went into tax planning shortly thereafter. The life of a litigator was not for her.

So there it is, in a nutshell, we lawyers, whether transactional or litigation practitioners, go forth to our various battles, the works of Sun Tzu in one hand, the writings of the Dalai Lama in the other. We seek resolution more than justice since we toil mostly in the gray areas and the legal questions we are called on to address involve issues of the human psyche as much as or more than the dollars and cents at issue in the transaction or dispute. Even in the realm of criminal law, we must constantly ask; do we seek retribution, rehabilitation or simply deterrence? Each case cries out for its own justice, each dispute for some vindication of human dignity and our continued ability to live with each other in a “civil society”. It is our job and our privilege as lawyers to seek what is best for our clients and for our community. Why the law? I could not imagine doing anything else!

Linda Northrup has been happily practicing business and real estate litigation since 1981, most recently with the Northrup Schlueter law firm, which she co-founded in 2006. (www.nsplc.com) Ms. Northrup was named a California SuperLawyer® in 2007.