A Final Lesson from My Father: The Lasting Value of Mentoring

It was a folksy twist that caught us by complete surprise. The small-town Methodist minister, arms outstretched, gazed down on the congregation assembled for my father’s memorial service and implored: “Tell us how you knew Gene.” His audience, composed largely of my dad’s former law partners and their spouses who had traveled from Dallas to Kerrville for the service, stared back. My mom and I exchanged glances. This was not in the script. The not-so-subtle attempt to indoctrinate the big-city folk into the ways of small-town Texas was met with silence.

I caught my breath.

Finally, a lone voice emanated from the back of the church: “Gene was my mentor when I was a young lawyer.” Then another, from across the aisle: “Gene taught me how to practice law.” Another announced: “If it weren’t for Gene, I never would have succeeded as an attorney.” And another: “Gene was my mentor too.” One by one they stood and testified to how my father had changed their lives by taking the time to mentor them, helping them to find their way as young lawyers. I don’t remember how many they were, and I don’t recall all that
they said. But the message was clear: My father was loved and revered for his long dedication to the tutelage of young attorneys. Though the experiences that they shared were from many years before, those experiences had made lasting impressions on their lives. Probably they were the primary force that motivated them to make the 5-hour trek from Dallas to Kerrville to honor my dad, their mentor.

Mentoring was just one of the ways my father unselfishly gave of his time to others without expecting anything in return. His *pro bono* legal service was performed humbly, under the radar. Never one to broadcast his virtues, my father quietly championed the cause of virtually every neighbor, family member, or friend who ever approached him in need. He volunteered his time for numerous charitable and civic endeavors. I don’t think he ever said “no” to any needy person or organization that sought his help. And, undoubtedly, every *pro bono* client he assisted remembers him fondly and remains grateful for his generosity. Yet, the largest contingent present at his memorial service was of the lawyers whose lives and careers my father had helped shape.

I must admit that mentoring has not been particularly on my radar screen of late. While I have always volunteered my time to a number of causes, mentoring has taken a back seat to charitable endeavors and *pro bono* legal service.

During my years as a partner at the “big firm,” I did a good deal of mentoring. I became discouraged, however, when young associates who I had carefully shepherded chose to leave the firm to take in-house positions, to raise families, or to re-locate. I felt, candidly, that my “investment” in them had not provided the return for which I had hoped and labored. I did participate briefly in the OCBA’s Mentoring Program, established by my friend and predecessor as President of the OCBA, Dean Zipser. I must confess I did so more out of my tremendous respect for Dean than a burning desire to mentor a young lawyer. And, predictably, I got out of the program exactly what I put in. (Fortunately, my mentee was an associate at a large firm that is, itself, very good at mentoring, so perhaps she did not suffer too much from my malaise!)

I now see that somewhere over the past 26 years of practicing law, I lost the point. *Pro bono* legal service is critically important, of course. Indeed, it is the responsibility of every one of us to ensure that the less fortunate receive access to justice and to needed legal services. We are officers of the court, privileged members of society, with a moral and ethical duty to give back to our community. Yet, our volunteer services should not be at the expense of giving back to our own profession. Every one of us who has ever grumbled about the lack of civility that has plagued our profession of late owes it to ourselves, our colleagues, and the profession itself to use our influence to change this unfortunate, cancerous dynamic. And change will not come from attempts to reform older lawyers, whose bad attitudes and worse behavior are so firmly entrenched as to make such an undertaking completely untenable. Change will only come through the indoctrination of young lawyers in the “right” way to practice law—not just the tools of the trade—although that is important too—but also the standards of conduct expected from the privileged members of a noble profession.

My father fervently believed that the law is just that—a noble profession. That belief translated into a lifetime dedicated to ensuring that it remains so, through the only truly efficacious means of delivering such a result—the cultivation and mentoring of younger lawyers. I doubt that my dad either expected or hoped to receive praise for his efforts. I am equally sure that he would have been overwhelmed by the outpouring of gratitude from those whose lives and careers he helped to shape. I know that I was, and that I will never forget what I learned from that memorial service—thanks to a folksy, country preacher, who challenged the “big city” lawyers to share their recollections of my dad, and to the many individuals who eagerly accepted his invitation.

So once again, my dad provided the wise mentoring that was called for to someone who needed the lesson. Only this time, the student was me.

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*Julie M. McCoy was 2006 President of the Orange County Bar Association, and practices law in Newport Beach. She may be contacted at julie@juliemcoylaw.com.*