

"From the Chair"

Column by Honey Kessler Amado

Los Angeles Lawyer Magazine
September 2000 (Vol. 23, no 6.)

My eight year-old daughter's friend, Fred, asked what he should know to become an attorney. I answered in part by sending him a copy of a letter that United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter sent to a 12-year old boy in May 1954, when that child, an M. Paul Claussen, Jr., had written to Justice Frankfurter with a similar inquiry. Justice Frankfurter wrote:

"No one can be a truly competent lawyer unless he is a cultivated man. If I were you, I would forget all about any technical preparation for the law. The best way to prepare for the law is to come to the study of the law as a well-read person. Thus alone can one acquire the capacity to use the English language on paper and in speech and with the habits of clear thinking which only a truly liberal education can give. No less important for a lawyer is the cultivation of the imaginative faculties by reading poetry, seeing great paintings, in the original or in easily available reproductions, and listening to great music. Stock your mind with the deposit of much good reading, and widen and deepen your feelings by experiencing vicariously as much as possible the wonderful mysteries of the universe, and forget all about your future career."

Justice Frankfurter was telling young Master Claussen to go out and first become a human being who is fully engaged in life. To be a human being is to seek experiences which deepen our understanding of ourselves and our society, thereby deepening our compassion for others.

Those of us who are already in the practice of law would do equally well to heed the words of Justice Frankfurter. For at heart, to be really good attorneys, we must first be fully engaged human beings. If the practice of law strips us of our opportunities to enjoy the arts, to participate in community activities, or to appreciate the "wonderful mysteries of the universe," then we are diminished both as persons and as attorneys. A one-dimensional attorney serves neither the law nor society because that attorney is myopic; he sees only the legal issues and not the human and social impact of the issues and controversies. She

sees the law only as a codification and interpretation of rules – not as a system that forms and defines our society.

But the attorney who has “cultivated his imaginative faculties,” who has “widened and deepened” her feelings understands that people and their responses to any given situation are shaped by their hopes, dreams, disappointments, losses, commitments, and stories. To use our laws well, to advance our own positions while maintaining the integrity of the law, mandates that we understand the human experience. This sensitivity is essential because to understand the complexities of the controversies in which we are involved, quite apart from knowing the law, we must appreciate the human dimension of those controversies. And that requires being an imaginative, empathetic human being.

Where do we learn that? Beyond our own experiences, as Justice Frankfurter suggested, we learn that through cultural pursuits such as literature, art, and music. These disciplines bring us a deeper understanding of the histories of other societies and cultures with whom we co-exist and a better appreciation of feelings experienced by all people. We also learn through social actions such as preparing food for the homeless, renovating a battered women’s shelter, or teaching a child to read. Insights gained through such cultural or social activities enable us to see better another person’s perspective – perhaps even to appreciate better that other person’s legal position – and to refine our own thinking.

We attorneys would do well to limit our practices to six days a week, to read things unrelated to law, to sit outside on occasion, to listen to the sounds of birds or of music, and to once in a while really look at the moon or go to the end of city lights and gaze at the Milky Way.

Your thoughts, ideas, and concerns regarding this magazine are welcome. You can reach me through the Los Angeles Lawyer magazine offices (213/896-6503) or at my e-mail HoneyAmado2@gmail.com.

I hope Los Angeles Lawyer is and continues to be a valuable tool to you in executing your duties as one able and entrusted to advocate in our government of law.

Honey Kessler Amado’s professional website is archived and may be accessed at AmadoLaw.com.