



A death in the family

Caring for your clients – the blessings and the burdens



Cooper

BY MILES B. COOPER

Recently, I lost three former clients. They passed in separate ways, unrelated to their cases. One, stabbed in an alley, lay moaning for hours before he died. The neighbors ignored him, thinking he was a homeless drunk. Another stood at a bus stop with his girlfriend. A car drove by and a shooter sprayed them with bullets. A third took his own life.

We spend our days learning about the horrors that affect our clients. We learn so we can tell their stories. That can take an emotional toll. Can we compartmentalize our feelings, leave them at the office door? No. But if we embrace, honor and acknowledge them, we can come out stronger and better able to help the next client.

Live their lives

I believe in the Spence lawyering method (that's Gerry Spence, but you knew that). Know your client. Know your opponent. Know yourself. Turn your inner eye to see their paths, and you will become them. (Sorry for the riff, Frank Herbert, but my editor has embargoed "grok in fullness.") Once you've lived their lives though, distancing yourself at the end is difficult. Your knowledge, your care continue after the case ends. That's a form of love. Embrace it. Know that while you care, you cannot control their destiny. Many of us are successful because we are control freaks. Acknowledging we cannot control everything is hard.

City of ghosts

Another way to embrace is to honor the places that gave rise to trauma. As I walk through the 7 x 7, as San Francisco's 49 square miles are known, I pass haunted locations. On one corner, the legs of two men were destroyed between a car and a building. On another street, a driver mowed down a bicyclist (memorialized for months by a ghost bike, an all-white bike chained near the location.) There's an intersection where I always envision a pink shoe in the crosswalk. Getting knocked out of your shoes is, unfortunately, not just a metaphor. As I pass these locations, I think about and acknowledge the person whose life was transformed there. It is a way I've found to embrace the feelings these places evoke.

Man's inhumanity

There's a certain block that strikes particular horror. I read an article one morning about a man who was stabbed in a Mission District alley. Neighbors heard him moan for hours. It had hallmarks of Kitty Genovese's rape and murder. Bystanders did little to help in the Genovese incident, which occurred in 1960s New York City.

Then I recognized the victim's name – the same as a former client. I called the former client's partner and learned it was not coincidental. At first, I judged the neighbors. But would I have done anything different? We live in the City. Bars near us empty at 2:00 a.m. Bottles break. People yell. Occasionally I'll go to the window. But it can be hard to parse the boisterous from the battling.

I think about Richard – that was his name – often. He's one of many I carry. One of my blessings and burdens.

The bag of bricks

Every call that comes in, every potential client, is a new opportunity to help. And a new burden, a new brick. The client, and the client's worries, conditions and troubles, are weight you have to bear. Every morning, I step out the door and get on my bike to go to work. I feel the weight of that invisible bag of bricks. I wouldn't have it any other way. I could not represent my clients without carrying their concerns. Nor could any of us. I'm proud to carry that bag. That's how I embrace the infinite sadness that comes with representing the dead and the wounded.

Don't let the burden drag you down

Sometimes that burden gets heavy. When it gets heavy, there's nothing wrong with lightening. By lightening, I mean talking about the issues and using laughter as a tool. Yes, laughter. Sit down with others who know the toughness. Talk about the horrors, the worries, the feelings. There's a reason gallows humor resonates in the death-dealing professions – from doctors to soldiers; police to paramedics. Us. Laughter allows us to embrace, acknowledge, and own the horrors we see.

Whatever you choose – embracing, acknowledging, honoring, laughing, or any combination thereof – have a method that prevents the burden from dragging you down into the darkness. If you don't, the ghosts visit at 3:00 a.m. And they don't go away when you wake up in a diaphoretic sweat.

A raw goodbye

This column is raw. That's how I feel. And why I need to say goodbye. Richard, Jaquan, and Lance: knowing you touched my life. Your absence is a tear in the universe's fabric. It drives my disquiet. Drives me to write this. Know that I cannot, and will not, set you down. That I loved you and will love you, bags of bricks and all.

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