

Wednesday, February 20, 2008
Baltimore, Md.
BWI
8:07 a.m.

Weather – overcast
Kiai – quiet

The Inevitable Journey: Lawyers and Leadership
by Angela Oh

I flew across the continent this week for a meeting that lasted many hours less than the time it took for me to get there.

It was a gathering of very sincere, smart, and strategic individuals, all of whom are somehow related to the legal profession. I am a lawyer, too. The room at the law school was filled with fifty or so people – professors, law students, big firm lawyers, legal aid lawyers, government lawyers, deans of law schools, foundation representatives, judges, and leadership scholars. One could immediately sense a bit of excitement as we began to gather at 8 a.m. to begin a conversation.

It was one of those conversations that is a turning point and a moment that will be marked as the time and place when a significant movement was born. I have been present in such moments many times before. I recognized it immediately upon the opening remarks being given.

On this day, we were gathered to engage across disciplines and generations to talk about the ways in which the education and preparation of lawyers can be transformed so that they can better meet the inevitable journey to becoming leaders in our society.

I was present as a member of the board of directors of an entity that began as a dream – healing and the law – that was the core of the Center for Law and Renewal (formerly the International Center for Healing and Law). Somewhere along the multi-year evolution of our

entity, the name changed to better fit the reality of the group we were trying to reach. Lawyers and law students.

Lawyers, it was reported, are unusual lot. When it comes to thinking about how to deliver training in leadership skills and theory – a tough crowd. As a group, lawyers are extraordinarily individualistic, resistant to being brought to subjects considered “soft”, cynical, result-driven, and generally not inclined to listen. Lawyers talk. The proverbial “mouthpiece” description might come to mind.

But this particular gathering of lawyers and legal educators was different...they actually wanted to listen to one another – and even more remarkable, they were willing to listen to presentations from other disciplines: medicine, public policy, and sociology. The planners were smart and on-target. They knew who to invite and how to frame the time so that a maximum degree of exchange could occur.

Leadership scholars were invited to engage with the group to help shape a series of answers to the question: How can we better educate and prepare law students for the role they will play in society once they graduate?

The sub-text: How do we bring humanity back into the practice of law so that this tool is not entirely lost to a profit-driven, materialistic, and even ruthless end. How do we revisit the cause of easing the suffering and despair in our world through values of integrity, compassion, and practicality?

The conversation hardly stopped over the nine hours we were gathered. Even lunch breaks were taken up with trying to learn and listen more deeply. The questions and conversations kept flowing.

We were fortunate to have one retired dean who posed a question: What might we see if we looked at the two: lawyers and leaders? Certainly, the two have some things in common. What he shared should be the subject of a law review article or commentary. It was an illuminating bit of thinking about how the two identities – the similarities and differences were described in some detail and by the

end of his comments, it was clear that the smaller discussion groups would have much more to say about the ideas that he expressed from his years of experience training law students, being a lawyer, and being a leader in one of the most prestigious legal education institutions in the nation.

Another commentator helped us to see that the work we were dreaming of doing was something that requires the capacity of an individual to express EI – emotional intelligence. The foundation of which requires self-awareness, an ability to empathize with the other (whomever that may be), and an ability to manage one's own emotional responses.

It was fascinating to see that the conversation was clearly going in the direction of a search to find a way to bring law students back to the fundamental fact that we are always dealing with human lives...even as corporate practitioners might believe they are dealing exclusively with dollars and contracts and “deals” – at the end of a career, one looks back and realizes it was all about people – every step of the way. At least this is what one big firm partner, now retired and teaching, shared with us.

One very successful small firm practitioner made the remark that law students may need to simply graduate and allow time to bring that which is really at the core being a leader and of being an outstanding lawyer: judgment. Life experience is what allows this skill to be developed, according to this commentator.

I thought to myself, “What about that law student whose life until law school was a series of hurdles, set-backs, encounters with realities that cannot even be imagined by those of us who have lived fairly unencumbered, middle-class lives?” That student who finds herself in law school, having slogged through realities of life that all signaled failure or discouragement - is ready from the jump to lead and to be wise and to exercise judgment in a serious way. So it's back on us (those privileged to have the time to consider this subject): What are we willing to do to identify and inspire, support, cultivate such individuals and others who know they are meant to do those things that will set the world on a track where hope and possibilities can be realized?

The fact that sometimes wisdom does reside in youth came very clearly through the voices of students who presented a brief set of thoughts and impressions about the idea of training law students about leadership. There was one who knew since childhood that he was going to work in an international business context – seemed that his own family experiences may have been part of the cultivation of that vision – though the words were not spoken. A successful partner in a big firm who will never forget where he came from and who helped him along the way. Another had been an organizer from childhood and by the time she got to law school, burnout was already in her vocabulary – school was a time to rest a bit (even with a new baby having arrived and law school courses being as demanding as they are). A visionary and a leader – someday the founder of an organization yet unknown that will be about bringing the spirit of justice to life. Another student was from a part of the country devastated by natural disaster. Her legal skills were being enhanced by working in the very client community she hoped to serve someday as a lawyer – and the skills set she zeroed-in on had much to do with being able to connect to the common humanity among us. A great judge someday. The final student was bright and earnest, having been in elite law school and undergraduate environments, he was choosing to move to public service by working on the intractable problem of poverty as a Caucasian male who on surface, didn't fulfill the stereotype...another Jack Greenberg?

As I listened to all the wisdom and knowledge flow; I also heard the voice of contrarians – myself being one at times (the lawyer in me). I concluded that it is still a matter of change – one person at a time.

Can change in one person make a difference in the profession? How about the world?

I am one who believes it is absolutely the case that transformation happens one person at a time. In reality, this is so. If, as human beings, we believe that we are connected to one another in profound ways – beyond what the civil and criminal justice system will recognize – then, there is absolutely no doubt that transformation of one person can have enormous impact on an entire system, on a community, on a society, on all of humanity and all of the world.

There are so many examples of this throughout human history – our own history. My history is in the history of all of humanity. So how can lawyers – who are so smart and so dedicated and so able to demonstrate that they have the capacity to work with Herculean determination – not see this?

It occurred to me that we are in the midst of a Presidential race and the two candidates running in the Democratic party for the nomination are lawyers. And each individual is having a tremendous impact on the party, the usual political activists, and those who have never participated or even cared, before. Indeed their beings are exciting the entire world – commentary about the race on just the Democratic side of the election process is pouring out from all over the globe. Can an individual make a difference? Absolutely.

It is a profound realization.

From where I stand, it seems that the possibility of educating law students about the importance of each and every one of them to the entire profession is quite real. It is the work that must be done for lawyers to understand what it might mean to lead in a way that is conscious and deep. It is a way to show how success can take the form of victories far outside the paradigm that currently exists: win/lose – a duality.

The civil and criminal justice systems are truly a construction of who we are as individuals and as a society. What does this mean in terms of what we face as societal challenges and problems that must be solved for the future to be bright?

Is the current rate of incarceration what we really want to continue to support? Is the current rate of billing clients for services related to the legal system's operation in litigation what we want to try to support into the future, with no end to the escalating number of hours or bonuses or salaries? Is the current condition of inadequate funding for health care, public education, and public services like libraries and parks and youth programs satisfactory? Lawyers play a big part in shaping and reshaping all of these conditions in society.

We began with an idea – really, a dream. We did what practical dreamers do: we gave “voice” to the possibilities of new things emerging. And we kept the dialogue going. At first, with just a few. Then those few found a few more – those few more were feeling something needed to be done, but had not had time to put words or give voice to what had to be said. Then, slowly, the architects and planners came – these people knew how to find resources, how to find other people who dream and build. And finally, to this moment: a gathering of people who could actually take the plans to build – and begin to build. It is an exciting time.

When I go out to speak to students, from middle schools to universities and law schools, I am continually inspired because inevitably I meet the next generation of realists who still hold high ideals and expectations for our society and the world. They are people filled with energy, vitality, and brilliance. They are the people who drive me when my despair over not yet having found answers creeps up. They are the ones to whom I owe a huge debt of thanks because they make me realize that the energy I have to share, is still worth putting out and giving...until that very last moment when I can no longer give and must recognize the time has come to expire. It is like running a marathon, knowing that there is someone I can pass along the baton to and that person will run just as hard as my generation of dreamers and builders and leaders have run. It is like the stick of incense that guides me through to the very last moment of my daily meditation, my efforts need to burn fully to the end. As one monk once said to me, “Angela, let us sit until the very last bit of the senko burns out...in this way, we push to the very end and can honor even the dying out of something.” I have a few more years; something new is being born as I am moving toward the end of my career – I see the birth of new lawyer leaders and my feeling is one of deep gratitude.