

President's Column

Giving Thanks

by L. Tracee Lorens

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It's that time of year when our holidays remind us to give thanks. I thought I'd take the hint and focus this month's column on both what we have to be thankful for in this country, as well as what we can aspire to accomplish in the future.

Family

Family and friends come first. Sometimes we lose sight of our priorities and we need to take the time to remember what is most important. Do you know where your family is? I ask this question because, to use a trite but true saying, the law is a jealous mistress. Law sets so many time limits upon us . . . great pressure and demands. It is too easy to keep pushing loved ones to the bottom of the list. I personally am grateful that I was able to keep track of the importance of my family this year. I'd like to suggest that we all wisely spend some time each day answering the question of where our families are in their lives and needs.

Our children are growing up – let's enjoy them. Take the time to listen to "Cats in the Cradle" by Harry Chapin, and think about those lyrics. We cannot keep putting off the experience of living with our families. If not this year, next year we might be able to all give thanks to ourselves for remembering to keep on track.

Our parents are growing older. I am grateful that this year I took the time to do things with and for my parents. We've had some members who lost their parents this year. I am thankful for the opportunities I have taken to have good memories stored away. We might all consider doing now the loving things which too often go to the bottom of the "to do" lists.

It may sound like heresy but the practice of law is a profession and vocation, not life itself. Let's be great lawyers but not at the price of losing sight of loved ones.

Our Government and Legal System

As I wrote this month's column, I was preparing to return to Cuba for a second visit. I was first there [legally then and now] on July 4th a year and a half ago. I am so grateful and thankful for our Constitution and for having been so lucky to be born in the United States of America.

It is great to be a **visitor** in Cuba. The Cuban people are wonderful people with a surprisingly strong spirit though they privately resent their government. It is not unusual to hear someone speak of the blessings of "the biological solution", *i.e.*, the current leadership cannot live forever.

But you can't visit Cuba without gaining appreciation for home. Let me share with you a brief example (which became apparent to me) highlighting the difference in these two systems. The Cuban government is proud that they have a 77% literacy rate. However, if you visit a Cuban library or bookstore you will find that books are scarce and the shelves are empty. The few books that you can find will be 30-50 years old and you are not going to find a book about shopping in the U.S. and/or in Europe or about capitalism or democracy. Likewise, Cuba has more doctors per capita than the United States or most European countries. However, there is very little medicine making that "matter of pride" nearly meaningless.

This does not mean, though, that the Cubans do not understand free enterprise. One of the common sayings in Havana is “No one lives on their salaries.” Everybody has a “side job”. It is not a job that they report to Castro, but one finds when visiting Cuba that every family supplements its monthly governmental paid salary by either feeding tourists lunch in their home, selling Cuban cigars on the street corner, hawking Che Guevara coins in the streets, or . . .

One Cuban joke tells about how a girl met and fell in love with a doorman at a tourist hotel (where they earn tips) and after many months found out that in reality he was not a doorman (which had been the big attraction for her) but instead was just another neurosurgeon! The reason that the Cubans find humor in this joke is that neurosurgeons earn \$24 per month in Cuba, while, of course, those receiving tips from tourists will earn much more in most days.

As with most jokes, the reason it is funny is because it is so true. During our last day in Cuba, one of the people in our group hired a driver who charged \$40 per day. The driver’s profession? He was an emergency room doctor. He made more at his “side job” than in his profession.

I am thankful that our society and this profession has given me the opportunity to advance and to be rewarded for my efforts. We too often take these gifts for granted. Cubans routinely risk their lives to try to reach our shores.

Our system is not perfect, but it is a living Constitution which allows for growth. I am thankful for the freedom to debate our differences. I appreciate that democracy allows government and its rules to change. I don’t like the current emphasis on tort reform, the Patriot Act, and a variety of other trends, but . . . !

As I write this article (on September 29), it looks as if Governor Davis will be recalled and another actor may become governor. I am thankful for the existence of a dynamic system

which will allow such a revolution to take place peacefully, even as I do not like the direction we seem to be about to take. Too many Cubans, on the other hand, get up to live another day in poverty hoping for “a biological solution”.

Diversity and Opportunity

We take for granted that things can change in this country -- that people can be born poor, obtain an education and maybe even become wealthy. I am thankful that our society is a dynamic one which encourages change and growth.

Much of what we have accomplished as Americans is because we believe in diversity. I live in East County where the politics are conservative and the juries stingy. September 11, 2001 painted the landscape out here red, white and blue. Yet, at the same time, two of the local merchants I frequent are first or second generation Iraqi immigrants. These wonderful people experienced two fears after 9/11. First, as Americans they had the same fears we all felt as the Twin Towers collapsed. Second, as muslims they feared they would be singled out as the enemy.

Both businesses have continued to prosper in this conservative community. These businesses thrive because they are well run by good people, accepted as such in a society which has always been fueled by diversity. I am not a Pollyanna. I recognize that there are racial, religious, and social differences in America. However, I also give thanks for the fact that our Statue of Liberty states the policy at our nation’s doorstep of both encouraging and accepting diversity.

I am thankful to be an American.

I am thankful to be an attorney. We are a large part of what makes this system work. Our legal system preserves opportunities for change and the redress of differences.

Thank you for allowing this “Year of the Member” to make us all a closer and bigger family of friends and colleagues. Thank you for your support this year and for helping me to make this year a great success! Lastly, I want to encourage you to set aside the time to show your appreciation of your family and our democratic system by trying to remember that what we do for a living is very important, but that our families and our nation should not be taken for granted or left unappreciated.