

President's Column

The Four Agreements

by R. Christian Hulburt

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I am in the middle seat between two large women on a long flight from New York to San Diego. The woman to my right is sleeping, mostly. The one on the left, talking, in sudden disjointed bursts, one or two words at time, louder than appropriate, and not actually to anyone. "Napolean . . . Jupiter . . . Secretariat . . . Janet Jackson . . . C-A-B-D . . . satellite," she barks. "Schizophrenia," is more like it, I think to myself quietly. Then I look up to see that she has her headphones on and is watching game shows, *Jeopardy*, then *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, on the Jet Blue TV monitor in front of her. I'll definitely need to get myself into a book . . .

I'm reading, for the third time, *The Four Agreements*, by Don Miguel Ruiz. It is a wonderfully simple best seller by a complex man whom I have come to know well and genuinely admire in the last year. Ruiz left his medical practice in Mexico to study, rediscover, and teach the ancient truths of his Toltec heritage. The book provides a powerful strategy that would surely bring great peace and happiness.

Simple to express, but much more difficult to master, Ruiz' prescription, consistent with all great philosophies and religions, includes these Four Agreements:

- 1. Be Impeccable With Your Word.**
- 2. Don't Take Anything Personally.**

3. Don't Make Assumptions.

4. Always Do Your Best.

I am trying to think about these ideas, at work, at home, on the freeway, or at the market. Though I'm not consistent with any of them, I am convinced that not a day passes that would not be more successful and fulfilling if I made these agreements my own . . .

Trial Lawyers Care. I met today in New York City with Kenneth Feinberg, world class mediator and Special Master of the September 11 Victims Compensation Fund. He is rapidly coming to the end of thousands of claims for families of those killed in the September 11 attacks. He was extraordinarily generous in his praise of the nearly 50 San Diego consumer attorneys, economists, and other experts who volunteered their services through ATLA's Trial Lawyers Care program to represent families *pro bono* in these claims. By this summer, when it is expected that all claims will be fully resolved, the "San Diego Team," the largest group of volunteer lawyers outside the New York-New Jersey area, will be responsible for obtaining nearly \$100 million in benefits for the September 11 survivors. The members of the San Diego Team universally remark that this opportunity to participate in the stories of 9/11 survivors is one of the most meaningful and memorable things they have done in their lives. They are all deserving of our special recognition and thanks.

Lawyers

Andy Albert
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Jude Basile
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Steve Boudreau
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David Casey, Jr.
Jill Cleary
Robert Ganglione
Ken La Fayette
Mickey McGuire
Bill Naumann
Steve Nunez
Kevin Quinn
Cathy Richardson
Elise Sanguinetti
Dennis Schoville
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Lisa Stepp
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Graphics

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Though Don Miguel teaches that we should not take personally what others say about us, whether compliment or criticism, I must admit I felt great when Mr. Feinberg referred to us on the record as "great Americans, performing a great service for our nation." But I was most impressed by him and his personal touch with our clients. After hearing different versions of the same story thousands of times, it would be easy to get hardened, even impatient, but Feinberg's manner was the opposite. He seemed genuinely moved by my client's story, genuinely interested in her needs, and spoke directly to her warmly, closely, gently. I argued one case. He is responsible for all 3000, and he, too, is doing it all *pro bono*.

Mr. Feinberg accepted the overwhelming task of delivering the nation's love and compassion to these innocent families. His is the only face of justice most 9/11 survivors will see, and today we saw the face of a man feeling the pain of thousands of unique individuals, trying his best to help them heal.

Kenneth Feinberg, you are a great American. You are performing a great service to the nation. Thank you . . .

The first time we went to New York to meet our September 11 clients, Ben Bunn and I walked to Ground Zero. Bulldozers were still clearing the debris. Remains of the innocents were still being recovered. The hole was enormous. Sidewalks for blocks and blocks were covered with makeshift shrines, photos, flowers, candles and tears. Rescue workers from around the city and around the world looked determined, but weary; exhausted, but driven. We walked slowly, quietly, whispering, if we spoke at all, as if we were in the sanctuary of a sacred place. I did not know anyone in the buildings or on the planes, but in the short hours I spent there, I felt a great personal loss, a deep sadness, and I added my tears to the others.

Today, at the end of my last trip to New York for the September 11 clients, my driver had

to detour from his intended route. Just a few blocks from Mr. Feinberg's office, police estimated 100,000 Americans marched for peace on the anniversary of the start of the Iraq War. Millions more around the world marched in similar rallies. Just minutes from hearings regarding the September 11 attacks, the scene felt especially poignant to me.

I can't help question whether our government has been impeccable with its word.

Saddam Hussein is an evil man, and the world is better off without him in charge of a country. But I don't feel safer now that we forcibly occupy two Arab nations. Though they repeatedly suggested otherwise, there is no evidence that Iraq played any role in September 11. There are no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. There were no mobile biological weapons laboratories. There is no difference between an "orange threat" day and a "yellow threat" day. The mission is not accomplished. And more people are being killed every day.

At home, the Bush Administration is waging war on the civil rights of its own citizens. Attorney General John Ashcroft, with the PATRIOT Act in his pocket, has gone farther than any predecessor in expanding police powers in the name of national security. Last month, Bush crony Hank Greenberg, Chairman of AIG, the world's largest insurer, branded trial lawyers as "terrorists" and called the tort system "a blight on our country". Drastic legislation to cap damages, restrict contingency fees, eliminate class actions, abolish joint and several liability, and create national "no-fault" auto insurance is being pushed each week in Washington to systematically dismantle the civil justice system. President Bush has made it clear he will sign any tort "reform" bills that reach his desk.

The November 2004 election may be the most important in my adult life. It seems unlikely to me that John Kerry, as president, would squander the international outpouring of support that followed 9/11 in the way that President Bush has. Similarly, I am quite certain that

a President John Kerry will not participate in the current campaign of deception and misinformation about the civil justice system, but instead will support the right of individuals to hold corporations, doctors, HMO's and their insurers accountable for the damages they cause.

We do not have the luxury of watching this one from the sidelines, and I urge you all to donate money and time to the November election. **We must do our best.**