

# WORDS OF WISDOM FOR DEANS FROM MICK JAGGER AND OTHERS

*John L. Carroll\**

## THE BEGINNING

FOR three years now, I have avoided this task of putting my thoughts about deaning on paper. Then came the dreaded phone call from Bill Richman asking me to contribute to the next Symposium on Leadership in Legal Education. Having finished my third year, I could no longer use the excuse that I was brand new.

As some of you know, I came to the dean business in a non-traditional way from the federal judiciary. Consequently, I had no ready role models—no deans to be my mentor. New Deans' School was very helpful, but a lot of what deans do is really on-the-job training. In 2002, a novel about a law professor, *The Emperor of Ocean Park*,<sup>1</sup> hit the bookstores. The dean of the law school in the novel offered a possible role model. She was manipulative and cunning but the very successful dean of a very prestigious law school. There is one passage describing an encounter between the law professor, Talcott Garland, and the dean, Lynda Wyatt, that is particularly descriptive of her qualities:

I look at her, she looks down at me. She is in the company of Ben Montoya, her tall, restless factotum who has a joint appointment in the law school and the anthropology department. Ben was whispered to be the logistical genius of the coup that toppled Stuart Land, and he remains Lynda's instrument, it is said, in the most ruthless tasks of her deanship.<sup>2</sup>

When I was contemplating Dean Lynda Wyatt as a possible role model, I had been in my deanship for less than a year and did not understand that perhaps I needed a tall, restless factotum or someone to protect me from faculty coups or, more importantly, someone to be an instrument for my most ruthless tasks. I asked for volunteers from my faculty to serve in those roles and none came forth. Fortunately, after reading the novel, I was able to attend more deans' workshops and meet more of my colleagues, which helped me to realize that real life law school deans are, thankfully, a far cry from their literary counterparts.

What follows is a stream of consciousness look at the important qualities that I think a good dean should possess gleaned from discussions with many of you and from the experience of my three years. As a framework for discussion, I have chosen motivational statements that I have collected over the years in my various

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1. STEPHEN L. CARTER, *THE EMPEROR OF OCEAN PARK* (2002).

2. *Id.* at 304.

careers as a United States Marine Officer, a traveling salesman, a practicing lawyer, and a federal judge. These statements seem to capture some of the major issues that flow through a deanship. I am a long way from mastering the skills that I need to be a successful dean. By now, however, I think I can identify them. I have had some real angst over doing this essay. I know that I am a member of an elite group and am generally awed by the caliber of my deans colleagues. The only way I have been able to muster up sufficient courage to write this was to affirm myself the Stuart Smalley way—by looking in the mirror and saying, “I’m good enough, I’m smart enough, and gosh darn it, people like me.”<sup>3</sup>

#### THE MIDDLE

##### *Either You Run the Day or the Day Runs You*<sup>4</sup>

One of the most difficult aspects of being a dean is time management. When I went through New Deans’ School, I was naive enough to think that the “Day in the Life of a Dean” exercise was contrived. I said to myself there was no way all of those things could happen in one day. Boy, was I wrong. That exercise was far more reality than academics. Coming to grips with the fact that my day would be changeable and there would be precious little time to accomplish anything during normal working hours was difficult. I will always remember the Monday morning that I returned to my office from New Deans’ School and found a copy of the local paper, *The Birmingham News*, on my desk. Two of my students were featured on the front page next to an empty beer keg. It seems that the neighbors were up in arms about the failure of these students to remove spent beer kegs from their front yard. Dealing with that issue was not exactly what I had planned for the day.

I now realize that real work gets done before 8:00 am or after 5:00 pm or on the weekends. I also now know that I am far more productive early than late. Consequently, I will schedule matters that require me to be at my intellectual best earlier in the day. As the day progresses, whatever limited charm and intellect I possess diminishes rapidly. Fortunately, I am able to occasionally rekindle what charm and intellect I have for evening alumni functions. The lure of money does that.

##### *That Which Does Not Kill You Makes You Stronger*<sup>5</sup>

Being a dean gives multi-tasking a new definition. In any given day, you are dealing with students, faculty, staff, alumni, potential large donors, the university administration, and the press. It is inevitable that you will make mistakes and certainly some of the mistakes may be big ones. The important thing is to learn from your mistakes. I have a good list of the bonehead things I have done. I

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3. Stuart Smalley, *Saturday Night Live* (NBC television broadcast). Smalley was a self-help guru portrayed by SNL series regular Al Franken between 1985-1995.

4. Jim Rohn, noted motivational speaker.

5. FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *TWILIGHT OF THE IDOLS 5* (Duncan Large trans., Oxford Univ. Press 1998) (1889) (“Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger.”).

regularly consult that list both to avoid those mistakes in the future and to realize that short of committing a major felony, there is almost no mistake we can make from which there is no recovery. In addition, every mistake helps us become better deans and better human beings.

*When There Is No Vision, The People Perish<sup>6</sup>*

There are many roles the dean plays; but in my judgment, there is no more important role than that of emotional leader and no more important aspect of that emotional leadership than the articulation of a vision that the many communities of the law school can understand and embrace. I am continually amazed how often I am asked to articulate “my vision” to law students and alumni. The articulation of this vision is not easy because it cannot be your vision; it must be the institution’s vision. I learned early in my deanship that the institution cannot flourish unless the vision possessed by the dean is also possessed by the faculty, students, and alumni. If there is not some sort of at least tacit agreement on where the institution is to go, the faculty will not support the vision, future students will not embrace it, and alumni will not support it financially. A visionary dean without followers to accomplish that vision goes nowhere.

*Alone We Can Do So Little, Together We Can Do So Much<sup>7</sup>*

There are natural divisions at any law school. First, there is the faculty. They want an environment where they can teach and write, often on their own terms. They have their own views of how the law school should be run and when and what they should teach and write. Second is the senior staff. This group generally feels a tremendous amount of pressure because they are the ones charged with bringing in high quality students, making the alumni happy, and raising money. There is not always a natural connection between the senior staff and the faculty, and those constituencies may, in fact, resent each other. Then there is rank and file staff without whom the organization would collapse.

You simply cannot be successful as a dean unless all of these constituencies are willing to set aside the things that divide them and work together. The most difficult task to accomplish at a law school is to foster a sense of “team,” a sense that no component of the institution can be successful unless all of the components are. After three years, I am hardly an expert in creating “oneness” at a law school. I have made enough mistakes, however, to understand some of the things that are important.

The first is communication. It is important that each of the constituencies knows what is going on at the law school. We have implemented a weekly e-mail newsletter that goes to faculty and staff, which contains information about law school activities and faculty activities as well as stories of personal successes. This newsletter gives us all a better sense about the place where we work and the kinds of people who inhabit it.

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6. *Proverbs 29:18.*

7. Helen Keller.

The second is transparency. I think the days of the secret, manipulative dean are over. Nowadays, a dean should be openly accountable to everyone at the law school and should be willing and able to answer questions about anything he or she is doing (with exceptions of adverse personnel matters). If a secretary wants to know why a particular student policy was adopted, that secretary is entitled to an answer—not an “it’s none of your business” response. If a student wants an explanation of why the law school is going in a certain direction, he or she is entitled to at least some communication on that issue.

One of the best things I have done is adopt an open-door policy for faculty, students, and staff. It goes a long way toward fostering communications, and no one has abused the opportunity to see me at any time. I also have breakfast with the first-year students in small groups throughout the course of the year and lunch with the third-year students. These “get-togethers” have been a real success. I get a much better idea about what is really going on at the law school, and I am able to provide an easy forum for students to ask questions and receive answers.

*It Is Amazing What You Can Accomplish If You Do Not Care Who Gets the Credit*<sup>8</sup>

This is a corollary to the last saying and something that is much easier said than done. Law schools are inherently places of turf. There is the faculty-dean-administration turf. Within the administration, there is turf that the senior administrators protect. There is even turf protection at the secretarial level. Breaking down these turf barriers is one of the most difficult tasks a dean encounters. No one as of yet has given me the talisman. I do know at least two steps in the right direction. The first is to minimize your role in whatever successes occur at the law school. Rarely are the good things that happen at a law school the result of the work of the dean alone. When you take credit for your successes, make sure you also recognize everyone else who contributed. In most instances, success comes from the efforts of a wide variety of people. The second step is to do all you can to make sure people feel appreciated. You cannot say “thank you” enough.

*The Best Index of a Person's Character Is How He Treats People Who Can't Do Him Any Good, and How He Treats People Who Can't Fight Back*<sup>9</sup>

As deans, we get to deal with powerful and important people all the time—important judges, distinguished professors, and rich alumni. The real test of what kind of a dean you are, however, is not how you deal with the powerful, but how you deal with the powerless—the people who clean your law school buildings, the students whom you do not accept because their credentials are not good enough, or the parent whose child has just been dismissed from law school. Your real successes as a dean will come from people like these who need your help but who can offer only thanks in return.

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8. Harry S. Truman (33rd president of the United States).

9. Abigail Van Buren (U.S. advice columnist “Dear Abby”).

*You Can't Always Get What You Want, but If You Try Sometime, You Just Might Find You Get What You Need*<sup>10</sup>

One of the quickest lessons I have learned is that being a dean is an incredible roller coaster ride of emotional highs and lows. One of the secrets to being a successful dean is the ability to dampen those highs and lows. There is always a feeling of disappointment when you lose a particularly bright student to another school, when your most productive faculty member says that he or she is going somewhere else, or when a donor you are sure would make your fund-raising year decides to back out of a commitment. But that feeling is always tempered by feelings of accomplishment measured in human and not financial terms. For me, there is no greater pleasure as a dean than being a part of the graduation ceremony and watching the products of your law school head toward the profession. The ceremony provides a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the power of the position. No one has greater opportunity to influence the future of the profession than we as law school deans. Being a dean is a tremendous responsibility with tremendous rewards. Deanships provide ample opportunities for personal satisfaction in ways you never imagined. While you may not get everything you want, a deanship can certainly give you everything that you need for personal and professional happiness.

#### THE END

I want to close with this final thought. If there is one message that I have encountered that offers the perfect universal advice for deaning, it is the message inscribed in the Bible Johnson C. Whittaker kept when he was at West Point. Whittaker was an African-American South Carolinian who matriculated at West Point in 1876.<sup>11</sup> In 1880, he was found beaten, tied to a bed, and mutilated. He was court-martialed for faking his own attack and expelled. The court-martial proceedings were eventually overturned, and President Clinton posthumously awarded Whittaker a commission as an officer in the United States Army. Whittaker's faith was a great source of inspiration to him, and in the Bible that he kept, he wrote the following words—"Try never to injure another by word, act or look, even. Forgive as soon as you are injured, and forget as soon as you forgive."<sup>12</sup> These marvelous words are perfect guidance as we engage in this marvelous world of deaning.

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10. ROLLING STONES, LET IT BLEED (Decca Records 1969).

11. See Patrick Murphy, *Murphy's Law: Johnson C. Whittaker*, at <http://www.usma.edu/publicaffairs/PVArchives/010223/MLaw.htm> (Feb. 23, 2001).

12. *Id.*