

CHANGE IS GOOD

*Thomas C. Galligan, Jr.**

“SO, you’ve decided to leave legal education and become the President of a liberal arts college?” Tony asked.

“I have,” said Amanda.

“And does your college have a law school?”

“No—it is completely undergraduate,” Amanda answered.

“So, how did you make that decision?”

“Well, obviously it was a personal decision about a great place and a great opportunity and a feeling that it was time for a change.” Amanda smiled.

“But that’s really some change isn’t it?” Tony asked.

“In some ways it’s a real change and in some ways it isn’t.” Amanda continued. “It’s a real change because I will not be in legal education as I have been for twenty years. It’s a real change because the students will be younger and less academically experienced. But in some ways it’s not so radically different.”

“Explain.”

“Well, I’ve always thought that a great legal education should be the culmination of a great liberal arts education. I guess what I mean is that we law school professors do claim to teach people to think like lawyers right?” Amanda asked Tony.

“That’s what we say,” Tony answered, revealing at least a little doubt.

“Well doesn’t that really mean that we teach them to be critical thinkers? That we ask them to read carefully? That we ask them to not make up their mind too soon? That we ask them to consider issues and problems from multiple perspectives and different angles? That we expect them to be able to communicate in writing? Orally? And with new technologies?”

“I’d say that’s the case, yes,” said Tony.

“Well, it seems to me that being a critical thinker, seeing the world through multiple perspectives, and being able to communicate are some of the positive things a great liberal arts education does or should do. So, in that regard, I’d say there really are similarities between a great liberal arts education and a great legal education.” Amanda sighed.

“That’s it?”

“Not at all. I’d say that what we try to do in law school really is to teach our students to teach themselves. We know that the law we talk about in class and in school today is not going to be all the law they need to know throughout their

* President and Professor of Humanities, Colby-Sawyer College.

legal careers. We know that not only will the particular law change but we also know there will be new bodies of law, new challenges, and more.”

“So?” Tony asked.

“So, that means that one of the things that lawyers have to be able to do is teach themselves. They have to be able to teach themselves new law, how old law will adopt to new problems, and how new law will develop to deal with things we can’t even dream up today. And, we have to teach them to be able to deal with those changes in law in light of what has gone before; so we want them to appreciate history and we want them to appreciate the ethical and philosophical underpinnings both of what may be changing and what we may be changing to. In short, in the liberal education phrase, we have to teach our students to be engaged lifelong learners. And, of course, that’s one of the basic goals of a liberal arts education.”

“I get it. But it sounds a little trite,” said Tony.

“Trite or true?” Amanda leaned toward Tony.

“Okay, both.”

“Tony, you know my father was a lawyer and one of the things that he loved most about the law, other than getting to know other peoples’ business was that no case, no issue, no problem was ever exactly the same as anything else he had ever done before,” Amanda paused.

“So, he learned something new every day?” Tony said.

“Exactly, and that’s what a great legal education and a great liberal arts education ought to seek to attain—commitment and enjoyment of continued learning. I also think that there is a real similarity between the methods employed in a great law classroom and a liberal arts college.”

“You mean pedagogically?” Tony inquired.

“Yes, but I may even mean more than that. The best way for me to explain it may be for me to talk a little about my own experience as a student. I went to a great research university and I have no doubt that many of my professors and teaching assistants cared very much about my education and what I learned. But I often got the feeling that they cared more about what they were doing than what I was learning.” Amanda crossed her arms and furrowed her brow.

“You mean they cared more about their scholarship than about their teaching,” Tony restated Amanda’s point.

“I think it’s more complicated than that. I think scholarship and emphasizing scholarship do not necessarily have to mean that one does not emphasize and focus on teaching. I firmly believe that my own scholarship has always made me a better teacher and vice versa. Writing has made me interested in my subject and keyed in to what my students were saying and not saying and what they were stumbling over. And teaching made me a better writer because I never taught a class where I did not learn much from my students and did not get ideas about things I wanted to write about. So, I can’t say that there is some conflict between teaching and scholarship.” Amanda sighed again.

“You are not being very clear,” said Tony, sounding like a law professor.

“I’m sorry. Let me put it this way. As an undergraduate, I was a Political Science major. I took a lot of poli sci, a lot of English and other Humanities, and Social Science classes; and in most of them I was assigned a book a week or a

Winter 2007]

CHANGE IS GOOD

515

bunch of readings each week and then I went into class and listened to what the professor had to say about them. I listened to what the professor thought about what I had read. I even had one professor in my first year in a history class who concluded at least two thirds of his lectures with a minute or two of Latin or German or Greek or French.” Amanda shrugged her shoulders.

“A little dilettantish, I’d say.”

“You’re just jealous,” Amanda smiled at her mentor.

“Hey you’re the one complaining,” said Tony.

“Not complaining per se but my point is that my education at the school I attended was passive. Now I take some blame for that but let’s not get into that here.”

“Awww,” said Tony.

“Anyway, when I got to law school I was asked to read less per week per class—”

“But I bet it took longer,” Tony interrupted.

“It did take longer,” said Amanda. “When I went into class after reading and rereading the material rather than listening to what the professor had to say about it, the good ones asked me to say what I thought about the material.”

“Socratic method, my friend,” said Tony.

“Exactly,” said Amanda. “And the method and the way it was employed by the faculty made me responsible for my own education. It made it much more active.”

“But you weren’t called on every day,” Tony correctly stated.

“Of course not, but after the early days when I wasn’t called on and I sighed with relief I got better at vicariously participating, at thinking how I would answer the question being asked if I had been called, and later, about thinking what questions I would ask next if I were the professor. Later, I got to preparing for class by asking what questions I would ask as I read the material before class.”

“Think that may be why you became a professor?” Tony asked.

“Of course it is,” said Amanda. “I loved it. I loved the give and take, the search, the analysis, the attempt to communicate what I thought, and the reality that there was an awful lot I did not and could not know. But the basic point is that in law school I felt like the good teachers involved me in my education, they excited me, and they made me an active learner. Quite simply, no matter what their personal affect in or out of class may have been, I got the clear impression they cared very much about me and the quality of my educational experience.”

“That’s what makes law school great,” said Tony with confidence.

“Tony, I think that’s what makes good education great. I think the attempt to engage the student and make the student an active participant in her or his education, both in and out of the classroom, is what a great liberal arts education attempts to do. In fact, a few years ago when I was visiting colleges with our oldest child, we were at a liberal arts college and it occurred to me as I listened to the presentation how concerned the school seemed to be with making sure every student was engaged and involved in school, in student development opportunities, in sports, in arts. The point is that they did not want to see any student get lost. They wanted each and every one of them to be a part of the

community. So I hope that's another similarity between law school and liberal arts education."

"Student centered education," said Tony.

"Isn't it all or at least shouldn't it be?" Amanda asked rhetorically. "I mean Tony, whatever type of school we are teaching in, we would not exist without our students. That is, there would not be any law schools or liberal arts colleges or engineering schools or business schools if there were not students who wanted and needed to learn about law, liberal arts, engineering, business, or you name it. Of course, we share our knowledge through our scholarship and our service but education exists, in every significant aspect, to teach its students. It seems so basic—one might even say mundane—but I don't think so. So while I may be switching from a legal focus to a broader liberal arts focus, I think the similarities outweigh the differences."

"Sounds like you're excited about this," said Tony.

"I really am; change is good and I am excited about it. And you know to get back around to where we started, there is another connection between law and liberal arts," said Amanda.

"And it is?" Tony asked.

"As I think of myself as a lawyer, I realize that for most of what I do I have to look at the world in an interdisciplinary manner—through multiple perspectives. On that score, many of the great advances we have seen in American equality have been fueled by law—civil rights for example—legal development has allowed us to learn from and appreciate multiple perspectives. But on a day-to-day level, as a lawyer, I have to think like a generalist; I have to be able to think critically; I have to be able to write; I have to be able to persuade. Persuading means I have to have some understanding of human psychology and rhetoric. I have to be able to understand at least a little bit about business and how it works. Increasingly today, many legal problems involve science and technology so I have to be able to assimilate scientific and technological information and processes. And, I think I have to have a sense of history and how today follows yesterday and will turn into tomorrow. And, of course, I have to be able to understand and even stir my clients' dreams. Anyway, doing and knowing all that stuff means I have to have a great interdisciplinary, continuing liberal arts education." Amanda stopped and smiled.

"Well, you've convinced me," said Tony. "Now, make sure you have fun."

"I think I will, Tony; I think I will."