

Why be a Lawyer?

By Peter R. Jarvis

I was recently asked to speak to a class of undergrads about law as a career. I was told that these students had heard many discouraging words about the ethics and morality of lawyers and that a positive message might therefore be appropriate. This caused me to think about what I value, and what I could just as soon do without, after almost 27 years in this business.

I do not think that American lawyers are inherently more or less ethical than the larger American population from which they are drawn. Put another way, all groups in our society include the good, the bad, and the ugly. As human beings, lawyers are neither inherently less moral, nor inherently more so, than the population at large. The unscrupulous and the scrupulous will always be with us.

I also do not think that being a lawyer is a particularly easy way to make a living. Most of the lawyers that I know work very hard for what they earn. Similarly, the fact that many lawyers go through “burnout” and leave the profession shows that this is no cakewalk.

On the other hand, I enjoy being a lawyer and I believe that most lawyers do so. I think there are several reasons for this:

- Even with all its limitations, the rule of law is a good thing, and lawyers get to promote it.
- Lawyers of all types are often privileged to participate on their clients’ behalves in some of the great issues of our time or any time. Although many matters do not raise core moral or social issues, many others do.
- On a purely practical level, lawyers get to help people solve problems and get on with their lives. This is true whether the people we are helping are individual clients or representatives of entity clients. There is much to be thankful for in a profession that allows us to be of practical use to others, and I believe that that is what most lawyers are privileged to do most of the time.
- I also believe, however, that even our purely practical work has a strong moral component. Even when an underlying legal matter is entirely mundane, we confront moral and less moral options in how we treat our colleagues, our employees, our clients, their lawyers, opposing parties and all other individuals with whom we come into contact. We also get the chance to advise our clients on how to treat others. Put another way, bedside manners matter.

Rabbi Kushner and others have observed that few people say on their death beds that they wish they had spent more time at the office. That is as it should be. On the other hand, that does not mean that time in the office is, or should ever be, morally suspect. We know better. And we do better.