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REFLECTIONS FROM THE NATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION—1971

ALFRED T. LILE*

To the beloved brothers and sisters of the National Bar Association :

I have just returned home from our recent N.B.A. (National Bar Association Conference). I'm sorry, but I left early! I'm pretending to be angry, but I believe I'm really hurt—hurt and lonely.

I spent the last several days at conference comparing jurisprudence success stories with my legal-oriented brethren, and I am wondering, here in the honesty of my privacy, if those fellows lied as much as I did. Could it be that many of them lied more than I did? Oh, not really lied. We merely related to each other the bright sides of our one-sided legal practices. And even with only four cases a day and practicing out of an eight man office, I mentally invented some real legal triumphs.

Now I'm wondering: Is this what our annual meeting of legal minds is—a forum for bragging about statistics known to have reality only in rhetoric and highly illusory dream worlds? (I could not show pictures of a new \$50,000 office, pass out cards showing my new partnership in the dynamically diverse white firm; so I carried the cutest picture of my personal white secretary that I happened to bring along.) It appears as though the manifestly alluring White American cult of success, measured in terms of personal possessions has enrolled us all as members in excellent standing.

Somehow no one except the young lawyers seemed to want to talk about matters I wanted and needed to hear most. Speeches were heard urging greater financial outreach for needy law students and our national and local bar programs, but the area I am from and nearly all the other lawyers I met (so they say) are well above the national average in giving and in membership. I wonder where were those who drag down the national average?

Brothers and sisters, as I ponder here in the rustic simplicity of this legal aid office what our national conference lacked, I think I felt the

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absence of *worthy goals*—real goals; in a word, a Black affirmation to the materialistic capitalistic “Midas dust” creed appeared to be extant everywhere. We heard about projected National Bar goals, and that’s precisely what they were, projected goals, very obviously copied from White philosophical goals, and rendered superficially compatible with National Bar goals.

I think I just wanted to hear a fellow attorney tell how he passed up a lucrative fee to aid a justice-denied indigent, because he clearly saw her *need*, and *cared*. But I did not hear it; so I returned home resolved to buy that boss new knit suit, new tennis racket, new golf clubs, and membership in the exclusive “Knights of the Black Camelia” social club. Or maybe, yes, maybe I just wanted to hear a senior lawyer proclaim that he’s in the legal field not because of the in-depth desire of his mother, but because of his conscious awareness of the lack of legal services for poor people, or because the cosmic tides of destiny had reached out and deemed him one of the Black legal illuminaries appropriate to move the mountains of injustice paralyzing less fortunates impaled upon the thirteenth rung of the social ladder. I think, since I did not hear it, I think I ought to cancel my low-domed limited reservation of store-front lawyering to the poor, and board the high-yield red carpeted private practice express. And yes, I think I’m going to ask the Board of Trustees to remodel this office and supplement my legal public servant’s salary.

To be sure, there were a few speakers, and personal acquaintances one met who approached the hallowed chambers of touching, encouraging exhortation; but they were so few, they stand out like scales of justice in a Kangaroo court.

Beloved brothers and sisters, have you ever faced a reaction against action type legal-aid boards of directors, a leaky legal aid office roof, the frustrated aggressive brother who swears his self-help methods (a bottle of gasoline and a wick) bring quicker justice than legal-aid lawyers? Do you know what it’s like to rescue a poor White from his legal problems, and afterwards have him exclaim in his pristine whiteness that a “Wat lawya cudda dun bedda”; or to have a board chairman demand withdrawal of a law reform case from the docket, and cease representing radical groups, or to have your feelings brutalized by a sister’s evaluative statement that “I want a white lawyer, not a Black one?” Have you shared such experiences? Well, I’m having some of the same problems.

I speak at Black churches on Sunday, lecture at local educational institutions, threaten local welfare demigods with thundering, burning and

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lightening from Mt. Sinai if they don't give my clients relief, and tell the brothers and sisters

that the itching in their super-bad jeans
should be channeled to birth control means,

and what kind of salary do I get for this, brothers and sisters? A salary so inadequate that only the activating force of personal involvement in mission to my brothers and sisters whose fate is that they lay claim to less of the King Midas' stuff than others. And yet, in spite of this over-riding satisfaction of being meaningfully involved, here I am, feeling sorry for myself and more than a little peeved at my employers for depriving me and my dependents from the raise I need so badly. Perhaps martyrdom isn't what it used to be!

Beloved brothers and sisters, please don't tell me what I ought to be doing in anticipation of our meeting next year. Give me rather, the great transcendent goals and inspiration needed *now* to aid those less fortunate overburdened by the enduring human crisis of financial destitution and denied the illusory right of justice. I need assurance! Do others need it too? Don't lecture me on what I'm missing in not being in on the "big money" . . . I know! Just tell me in so many words that I, we, all of us are not just meandering bubbles of foam cast upon the shore of life by the tides of cosmic chance. Tell me that we are launched in the world by a purposeful power, that while we in the legal profession can't move mountain ranges, we can move mountains.

And methods, how the brethren at the national confab elaborated on their techniques and methods. But, beloveds, I need goals and targets that cannot be measured by charts and statistics. I need, at least once a year to meet with the brothers and sisters, to encourage and be encouraged. Is this asking too much? I'm watching this forward, changing and on-going world fall apart before my very eyes; and when I go the National Bar meeting, it is my strong exhaustive opinion that being fed castoria-sized doses of ego structured politics, status-tician testimonials by the dozen, and an administration spooning out structured doses of "what we have done in the past" pentathol, well, that is not exactly where it's at! So now you know why I and a few others went home early.

But back to you, brothers and sisters, tell me I've struck the right cord when I affirm the principle that more Black lawyers ought to subscribe to a more intensive Black internal dynamic where our Black awareness will lead us, through the American judicial system, to overturn the deep

running injustices heaped upon Black people and their financially inarticulate White counterparts.

When I'm despairing of needed answers, and examples of anti-Midas-dust discipline, National Bar Association leaders and members, where were you with the examples I need? Were you leaders voted into office because you have computer toned minds; are relatively more mature than we in the ranks, and do you have the unique knack for placing round pegs in round holes, or because you possess those rarely combined gifts of charisma, justice-consciousness, and wise leadership?

N.B.A. News Releases! Please don't speak to me of news releases. Leave the propaganda to the propagandizers and the status-seekers. I need more faith in my fellow lawyers. Yes, it's good to know about how much "Midas-dust" the in-group is making; about finely toned courtroom techniques, and office decor impressed with the imprimatur of the downtown crowd. But honestly, every time I view the news media, measure the dimensions of the world situation, and take Sunday morning services seriously, I get the feeling that I won't be around long enough to benefit from my skillfully managed meagre budget, my Black awareness, and, my justice consciousness.

Beloved N.B.A. administrators, my prayer for relief is that you at headquarters will serve the neophyte Galahads working among the out-group, as they need to be served. If I pray in anger will you disdain my words? How must I approach you for help? Don't you understand that much will be expected of the present administration? Don't you understand that Sir Galahads like me cannot continue to lead the younger Black Knights day after day in a giving, caring, meaningful sacrifice to our lesser "together" Black countrymen! We go dry sometimes. Won't you let us know that our sacrifices are worthwhile! Our accomplishments are significant!

Of course I realize that our clients and our contributions may be small compared to those of the private larger law offices, but then these cannot always be measured in dollars, cents and statistics. For here and there in storefront-type legal services programs and public-interest firms across the country, we are changing the life style of America—someone who hated lawyers now is reconciled with them, someone not attuned to the illusory will-o-the-wisp of justice, has now found her, someone laboring under the handicap of a personal racist mentality has a White legal services attorney weigh his cause on the scales of justice and come out the winner, and in the process, an emancipation from the chains of racist bondage.

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Even though some of our more militant brethren may have over-performed at the National meeting, they are not the ogres some would make them out to be. They are bound like consecrated Siamese twins to the service of the poor. They are greatly pleased about *helping side-track* an eminent divorce, rather than strengthening their bank account by ramming it through. They are overjoyed about the cases they refer to their Black attorney brethren that are so diligently and uncompromisingly pursued that they add stature and meaning to the terms justice, equality and right. It's a stirring sight to see:

these young Black legal minds, working shoulder to shoulder with their White counterparts to support a fair and justiciable cause,

to commence a class action of such lofty reform proportions that thousands profit thereby,

to rap dazzlingly and meaningfully in a community education forum, or

to appear before a high legislative body stirring their attention to correct a monumental wrong, or

score a triumph before a court of review, or

direct the thrusts of a community group (gangs) to search for and find the underside of the meaning of truth and justice that so often has eluded them.

I am happy that this small group of "militant brigands" has pledged even more of themselves for a higher quality of service for the coming year.

Ah, but when I come home from holding hands (not literally) with neurotic, aging Black women, unemancipated oversexed young boudoir bounders in need of welfare aid, gang members bent on self-help because the legal process seems so unfair, lengthy and cumbersome . . . and find the refrigerator down, the washing machine broken, the children fighting, the wife's food in a high state of unfitness for human consumption . . . well, not much love for one's work is left in this suffering Black servant's heart. These things take their toll, my brethren. Some of my young Black Sir Galahad ghetto attorneys tell me that after such days in the office, their children think they are Frankenstein with Samson hair-cuts: too ferocious to be their fathers, and too tired to be brutes. Brothers and sisters, I am tired! And when I make it to the Annual National Bar meeting, I want a swift needle in the arm, not a kick of personal pronouns

mouthed questionable personal accomplishments of some capitalistic status-tician. Those young ghetto service Galahads and I need to hear less about refusing to take cases of the financially uncircumcised and more about partaking of the bread of life of Black awareness dedicated to helping our people.

Beloved counselors, brothers and sisters, is it not true that our Black awareness lawyering calls us to be different from the attorneys not of color among whom we work? Have we not tasks before us other than joining and sustaining membership in the affluent society? Did not our undergraduate education and the spirit of the times emancipate us over and above this materialistic capitalistic society? Yet, in times past have we not permitted false brethren to be secretly swept into high office to spy out our freedom and bring us into bondage? When I became free from my consecration and dedication to capitalistic materialism, I would willingly have turned over to "Mr. Charlie" all the chains he had so securely used to bind me, had I not observed some of the brethren trying on new chains for size. So, like the select brothers and sisters at the national meet who are in love with the "Midas dust" of capitalistic materialism, I too am seriously pondering deserting my soap box and returning to my former habits for I am tired of traveling the Black awareness route with so few companions. I'm discouraged as I compare the high goals of the National Bar Association with the petty political and financial goals set in the past by our leadership. I, like some of our young "Turk" militants who tried to overturn things at the national meeting, need something far greater to work for; and I need some Black awareness giants to walk with this not too well-traveled writer. My discerning eye, finely attuned to the issues of justice, grows weak as its tries to look away from the high-yield dimensions in finances my private practice brethren say lie in store for me if only I give up this Black awareness, justice consciousness nonsense.

Do I ask too much as I petition for your help? Is my prayer for relief in vain—for what other reason do we exist or call ourselves brothers and sisters but to strengthen each other to see with the eye of the eagle National Bar goals beyond the transience of our brothers not of color? Come next year and I will return to our National Bar Association annual meeting, hopefully to hear your personal *triumphs and defeats* as you share mine. Let us multiply our Black awareness, practice our compassionate belief in justice for our people, secure the rights of the prisoners, the mentally ill, welfare mothers, juveniles, and the hungry. Let us shape our methods

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and moods, and enlarge our dependence upon each other, driven by our Black awareness and justice consciousness. This is a totally new thing isn't it, this Black collective justice consciousness, this tied-togetherness, this capacity for sensitive quick action responding to the injustices of our time? It is obvious from our last national meeting that we have not yet developed an earth-sized courtesy, respect and tact for each other; nor have we found the new concern for persons overburdened by the giants of injustice that stalk our land. Until we do, the scales of justice will balance between good and evil, justice and injustice. They will be on somebody's side, yes, but without our intervention, not necessarily on the right side.

And after you have inspired and joined up with this unworthy co-counsel, if you brothers and sisters are fortunate enough to "graduate" before I do, perhaps the Chief Counsel, Chief Lawgiver, and Chief Justice who knows his own will say to you, "Well done, thou good and faithful co-counsel, you have fed my lambs."

Let's meet again next year at the National Bar Association annual meeting. N.B.A. we love you.