



Wade's Excellent Adventure: Lessons In Diversity

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Some days in the practice of law in Atlanta are more instructive than others. This was such a day.

The client was most insistent. It would not be possible for us to win his case unless I received the blessing of his guru. The guru would be in town for a special appearance. He and I needed to appear together so that he could present his case. He gave me the date, time and an address in Clarkston. I attempted to explain that his case, a dispute over an investment in real estate, would be decided upon legal principles and evidence, and could not possibly be influenced by his guru. "Be on time," he said.

When I arrived at the appointed time, the parking lot was full of men of south Asian descent, standing around talking. Somehow they knew immediately that I was in unfamiliar territory. They directed me inside the temple where I was instructed to remove my shoes. The client, who was dressed in a beautifully embroidered tailored white suit in the Indian tradition, soon greeted me. We waited in a hall where a group of bronze young men, with shaven heads and wearing nothing but loin cloths wrapped around their torsos, were standing guard in front of the room where we were supposed to have our audience with the guru. After a short time, the guru's attendants ushered us into a room where the guru was seated on a raised platform. Everyone in the room was either kneeling or prostrate before the guru. I was directed to do the same and complied, kneeling next to the client. Several minutes of rapid conversation between my client and the guru followed. I understood nothing. Then suddenly, the guru extended his hand to me, and I instinctively grasped it.

Grasping the hand of the guru, I learned quickly, was the wrong move. I discerned my error from the way in which the guru recoiled and the supplicants in the room let out an audible gasp. The client was momentarily horrified, but then the guru continued speaking. The client began to beam. The guru then said to me in English that the client's case was just and that we would prevail. I promised to do my best for him. I was handed a small package of cashews that had been specially blessed, and was directed outside. It was a

great day, the client later told me.

Returning to the office, I searched in vain for an appropriate billing code to enter on my time sheet. I was interrupted by the receptionist who announced that Joan Smith was on the phone. "Who is Joan Smith?" I wondered. Then I thought about a case I had just started with some Valdosta lawyers with the firm of Smith, Smith & Smith; maybe Joan was related to them. I took the call. "How's it going, Wade, and how are Harmon and the rest of your partners doing?" the voice said cheerfully. "Great," I said as I tried to identify the voice. She went on talking and I continued to give monosyllabic responses until she said, "You have no idea who I am, do you?" "No I don't," I confessed. She chuckled and said, "Well, you used to know me as John Smith."

An uncomfortable silence followed. Using my powerful skills of deductive reasoning, I realized that this had nothing to do with Smith, Smith & Smith in Valdosta. "Uh...Uh..." I said. I then remembered John Smith, a prominent and successful Atlanta lawyer, who had generously given of his time to consult with me on a difficult case several years ago without charge. I was pondering what this meant and what to say. Then she rescued me. She explained that even though she had what most would consider a happy successful life--married with two kids, a great practice and lots of friends--something was wrong and she had to make the change. She said she made the change anticipating that she might lose her law practice. She said she personally called each client to tell them she was now Joan and not John. She rejoiced in the fact that she had not lost a single client, and she recounted a humorous conversation with a farmer from Unadilla whose only response to the news was, "Does this mean that I won't get my money?" She assured him she would still try to get his money for him, and he was satisfied.

She was calling me because she wanted an appointment to discuss a personal legal issue she was facing. We agreed to meet for lunch. My mind wandered. "What do your children call you?" I asked. "Joan, of course," she replied. I had no further questions.

What, if anything, did I learn from the adventures of this day? Despite my liberal arts education, my law degree, and what I thought was a wealth of worldly experience, I found that I was ignorant and unprepared for the diverse clients I was trying to serve. I had some learning and some growing to do. For I believe that in order to truly serve, we must first seek to understand.

I am grateful to former Atlanta Bar President Seth Kirschenbaum for creating the Multi Bar Leadership Council, a consortium of the leaders of 15 bar associations and the State Bar of Georgia's Diversity Program in metro Atlanta representing many of the diverse groups of lawyers serving our city. Formed in the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, the MBLC has

fostered cooperation and understanding among lawyers by celebrating the strength of this city's growing diversity. In this way we hope to continue to learn from each other so that we can better serve our clients and each other.

¹ The names have been changed to protect client privacy.

