

# Connections and Equanimity

By Kathryn Stebner



After a very contentious and upsetting mediation with defense counsel, I had an hour to sit down in a restaurant and have a glass of wine and think about what I was going to write. I was angry and felt that we were not treated with integrity. I couldn't shake it, even after 38 years of practice. I still can't get used to it.

As I was talking to the bartender, I asked her what her thoughts were about what was most important in life. Her response was simple – “connection.” It struck me as it was very much in line with what was on my mind. I looked up the definition of connection on my phone. According to Google, connection means “when two or more people interact with each other and feel valued, seen and heard . . .”

I recently lost a good friend and colleague, Sarah Colby, who I had worked with for over a decade. I attended her funeral with her 45-year-old husband, her mother and her 15-year-old son sitting in the front row. Friends and colleagues shared stories and memories of her, they spoke of her commitment to social justice, her wit, intellect and her humility. I learned that this amazing woman, a social justice warrior, was still walking the halls of prisons as an attorney for the Southern Poverty Law Center, trying to stand up for the humanity of incarcerated people, even in the end stages of her aggressive cancer. When I stood up to speak, all I could see were those three people she held most dear to her that she had left behind. Her heart.

I realized in that moment that the connections with our families and friends – human connections – is what allows us to fight day after day for our clients. We deal

with tragedy, trauma and conflict daily, and the way that we anchor and ground ourselves, the way we can continue to persist with clear eyes and full hearts, is because of our common humanity and the connections between ourselves and others. These human connections are the way we can continue to move forward in the face of the unbearable suffering we see day in and day out. People often ask me, “How do you do it? Seeing all those terrible things in nursing homes?” I am sure you have all been asked these types of questions.

Now I ask you to take a moment to consider the answer. For me, I believe that it is the re-centering to a deep quiet place that saves us. We all need a sanctuary.

Years ago, I went to a Buddhist retreat for lawyers focused on “equanimity.” It turns out that all types of lawyers are looking for mental calmness, composure and evenness of temper in a difficult situation. Honestly, when I signed up, I wasn't totally sure what the word meant.

Equanimity comes from a combination of animus, meaning soul, and the Latin phrase *aequoanimo*, meaning with even mind. Equanimity is defined as being abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

Research psychologists have begun to focus on the benefits of equanimity, and the practice has been found to significantly help us relieve stress.

During the retreat, myself and lawyers from all walks of life talked about how we work to maintain equanimity in times of extreme conflict. Many of us were troubled by our reactivity, by our anger towards our opposing counsel, and by the way we handled conflict.

I have thought long and hard about this issue. Handling conflict is one of the hardest parts of our profession. The negative effects of constant conflict can eat you up if you allow it to, and therefore equanimity is crucial to keeping yourself sane. Equanimity allows you to remain grounded, to go back for another round of potential conflict, and it allows you to remain open to finding the connections with humanity in the people on the other side of your conflict, whatever those connections may be.

So, comrades, as we approach the end of one year and the beginning of another, I urge you to take time to appreciate the human connections between those with whom we may have conflict. Whether it be attorneys on the other side of our cases or people we meet who fall on the other side of the political aisle. I also urge you to take a moment to appreciate, remember and respect the humanity of the checkout person at the grocery store, the person asking for change near the freeway on-ramp or the person in a faraway land whom you may never meet.

And, lastly, I urge you to carve out space to sit down and think, or dare I say, meditate, on how you can foster and build up your equanimity toolbox.

We walk in difficult times. May we find peace, humanity and love to carry us forward. ■

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