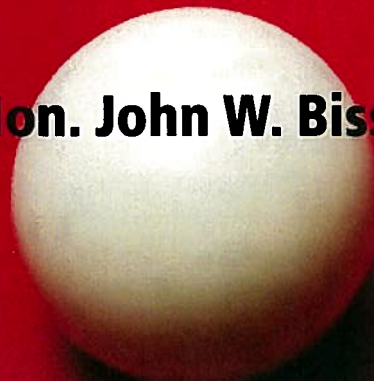




THE TRIANGLE OF LIFE

A Speech to Newly Admitted Attorneys

by Hon. John W. Bissell





Following is a speech Judge Bissell has made to inspire newly admitted attorneys. The message: The importance of family and hobbies to become a fully rounded professional.

Ladies and gentlemen, and most importantly our new attorneys, let me direct your attention to the game of pool. We all know what a pool rack looks like; it's an equilateral triangle. I am asking each of you to think of this triangle as a representation of your life and the way you would choose to live it. This triangle, of course, can be turned, and no matter how it sits, it's always the same. A different point may become its apex, but the other points then form a new base of size and stability equal to that which preceded it. Therefore, the equilateral triangle is the most stable of all geometric shapes.

For purposes of our discussion today, I would like you to think of the apex of this triangle as your profession and the manner in which you choose to pursue it and to conduct yourself in that pursuit. I will also ask you to think of one of the points at the base as being your identity, that is, who you really are, and include in that such things as your hobbies, your avocations, the other things that are individually of interest to you. Think also of the other point at the base of this triangle as your relationship and commitment to your family and those with whom you are particularly close.

For all the exhortation that you will hear from members of the bench, the bar, from associates in our profession, and indeed from myself, about the need for complete commitment and dedication to the practice of our profession, I ask

you to keep your life as a whole in proportion, an equilateral triangle. Avoid having the demands our profession imposes upon you rise to such heights, so dominating the skyline of your life that the base of this triangle shrinks and shrinks until the entire structure becomes no longer an equilateral triangle, indeed hardly a triangle at all, but an unstable, tottering tower. Let me take a moment to address each of the points in our triangle of life.

By all means, in the conduct of your profession, pursue nothing less than excellence and settle for nothing less. In doing this, be aware intimately of the standards of ethics that govern our conduct as attorneys, and maintain the level of your own conduct far beyond the minimums required by our disciplinary rules. Don't shirk the hard work that is necessary to produce your best work in order that your clients' interests can be served to the fullest, and in order that the fruits of your labor can flow down the inclines of this triangle providing the wherewithal to pursue your own interests and to participate with and confer benefits upon your family and loved ones. But, with all this, strive with equal vigor to avoid allowing your professional commitments to obliterate your own identity or to tower above your commitments to your family.

Be yourself, and keep being the person who you are. Keep your hobbies and avocations and develop new ones, some of which the practice of law itself may lead you to. Don't diminish the importance of these personal pursuits. Avoid the "I don't have time for them now" outlook. Better yet, look for new and interesting things to do either within yourself or as a member of your community. Do some of those things that you undoubtedly have thought about in the "I've always wanted to do" category. I suggest to you further that these personal pursuits should not only be fun and enjoyable in themselves, but they should be as far removed from the area of your professional endeavors as possible. When you do that, you are best preserving your own identity and gaining truly the re-creating of recreation that will allow you to return to your work, whether it is in the next hour, next day or next week, refreshed and with renewed enthusiasm.

While somewhat reluctant to use myself as an example, I can advise you that my main hobbies are softball, barbershop quartet singing and refereeing ice hockey. I enjoy them all immensely, not only because they are great fun, but also because they have absolutely nothing to do with my work. And whatever august professional position I may hold is absolutely meaningless to my fellow teammates, barbershoppers and hockey referees, as it should be.

Undoubtedly, nearly all of you have hobbies that allowed you to set aside the rigors of either school or your employment. Please don't give them up. Expand them so that you can continue to be who you are.

What about your family and loved ones? You know we have a lot of J.D.s in this audience, but we also have a lot of P.H.T.s out there. Now at this moment if I asked all the P.H.T.s to stand up, you probably wouldn't know what I was talking about. The P.H.T.s of this world are those who can proudly and wearily say upon the completion of your law school career, "while he was getting his J.D., I was getting my P.H.T. (putting him (her) through.)" Probably right in this room, and certainly in the lives of each of you, there is a P.H.T. with whom you have shared a considerable amount of your life and affection. It may be a spouse, parents, or both. Remember these people. Keep them in your lives. Keep them in your time. Give them and your children and your grandchildren the time and commitment they deserve in this equilateral triangle of your life.

There isn't a full-time litigator, myself among them, who, with young children, hasn't found himself in a position where he leaves his home before his kids are up and returns after they are in bed. There will be occasions when this is unavoidable, but please don't let it become a regular work pattern. Life, particularly with your children, is too short. At the very least, carve out evening and weekend time for them.

I recently went to a funeral of a universally respected member of the bar, a jurist in fact. In the eulogy this man was praised for his tireless dedication to his work. An example was given that on a summer afternoon when his children and grandchildren were at the beach, he could be seen sitting on his lawn in his coat and tie reading transcripts. My first thought, because it was appropriate to the occasion, was "my, what admirable dedication." But on reflection, I have thought, "what a shame." This man could have been on his hands and knees in the sand at the beach, building sand castles and wrestling with his children and grandchildren. I suggest to you that

if his life had remained an equilateral triangle that is where he would have been, and there would have been no accompanying disservice to those dependent upon his work efforts.

Of course, participation in family activities or projects is great recreation in itself, and it is also a great equalizer. Once again, it is awfully difficult to feel oppressed by the pressures of your job while attending a child's soccer game, touring the Museum of Natural History looking for the dinosaur exhibit, or patching a sewer line on your recreational vehicle in the middle of the Maine woods.

So, what I've tried to do here today is put in a word both for that self that is inside you and for the P.H.T.s of this world. Keep them in mind, and you will be able to achieve in your life the bal-

ance symbolized by this equilateral triangle. If I may employ in closing an often-used phrase, "the law is a jealous lover," and indeed that is so; demanding and deserving attention, dedication and tender loving care. But nevertheless, a lover only. Please remember this jealous lover isn't you, and isn't a member of your family.

Thank you. ☺

Hon. John W. Bissell joined Connell, Foley LLP in 2005 as counsel, and serves as chair of the alternative dispute resolution department. He also is a member of the firm's business litigation practice group. Prior to joining Connell Foley, Judge Bissell served 27 years on both state and federal courts in New Jersey, and retired as chief judge of the U.S. District Court of New Jersey in 2005.

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