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Service is Our Raison d'Etre

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Editor's note: Professor Taylor made these remarks on May 19 at the final convocation of the Cornell Law School class of 1996, which had selected her as speaker. Taylor became associate provost of the university on July 1.

For three of the six years I have been a professor at the Cornell Law School, on the third Sunday of May I have stood here—at this lectern—in this hallowed hall. In each of those years I have noted

- the jubilation of the mothers and fathers: no more tuition checks!
- the pride of the faculty: one more crop of critical thinkers harvested!
- the relief of the graduates: no more retorts on torts!

When I addressed the class of 1992, I felt honored to have been elected by the students. When I addressed the class of 1993, I felt honored and flattered to have been chosen once again. Today I am honored, flattered, and ecstatic to have one last opportunity to speak to this graduating class before we leave the Cornell Law School.

As I prepare to move to my next arena of service in the newly created post of associate provost at Cornell, the message I leave with you today is this: Service is our *raison d'être*. It is the keystone of the legal profession. Without it society collapses under the weight of its own inequality; without it civility crumbles under the pressure of winning at all costs; without it humility falls to the self-aggrandizement of the winners.

Class of 1996, I firmly believe that “the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” Allow me to repeat that statement by Albert Schweitzer, a member of the medical profession as well as a philosopher: “The only ones among

you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.”

“We were not put on this planet to get rich,” says David Berg, senior partner of the Houston law firm of Berg and Androphy. “We were not put on this planet to dominate cultures. We were put on this planet to create and maintain order and civility by applying these rules [of law]. We are a service profession.”¹

But what does it mean to say that we are a service profession? How do we distinguish what we are from what we are not?

I prefer the distinction posited by Richard Foster, author of *Celebration of Discipline*. If true service is to be understood and practiced, according to Foster, it must be distinguished from self-righteous service. I agree with the distinctions he makes, as paraphrased below:

Self-righteous service comes through human effort. It picks and chooses when to serve; it requires external rewards. Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results and affected by moods and whims. It is insensitive and temporary. It is impressed with the big deal. It fractures community.

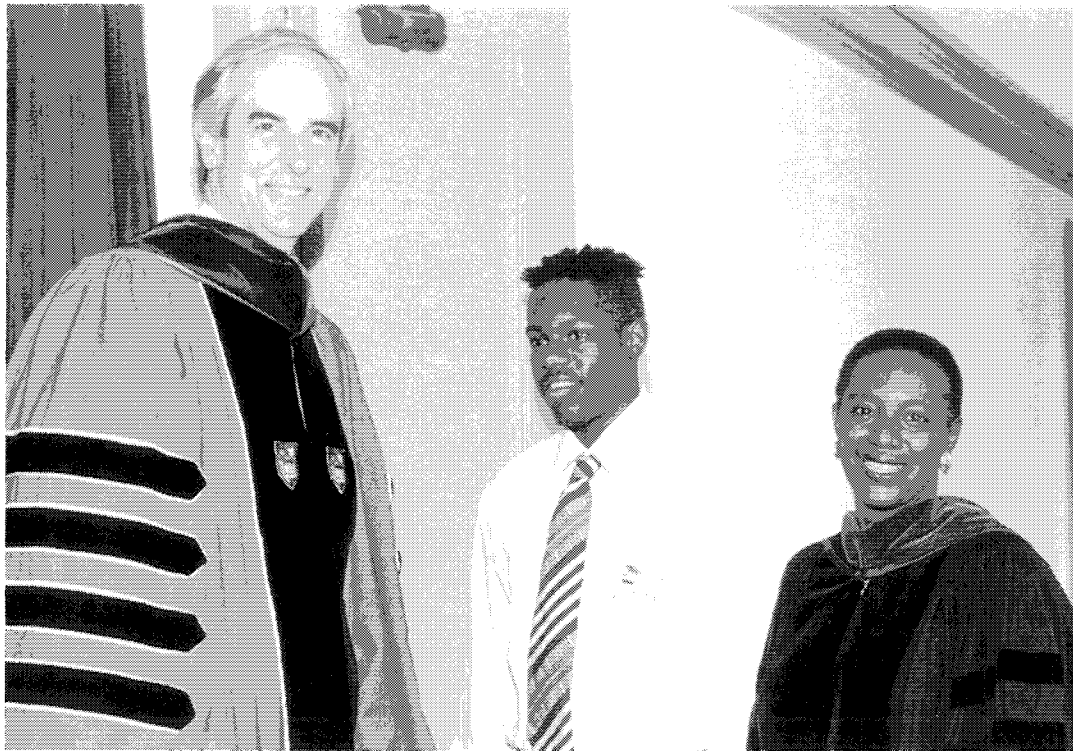
True service comes from a relationship with the divine other deep inside. We serve out of our whispered promptings, our urgings. True service rests contented in anonymity. It is free of the need to calculate results. It is indiscriminate in its recipients. It ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need. True service is a lifestyle, an ingrained pattern of living. It builds community.²

My hope, class of 1996, is that you will seek and find ways to contribute true service to your clients, your profession, and your community.

Let me hasten to say that true service does not mean that you must be poor, that you must be



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Professor Taylor (right) with her son, Robert, and President Hunter R. Rawlings III before the 1996 law school convocation

saddled with routine matters, or that you must pass up offers from Wall Street firms. True service does not mean that you must forgo flying the Concorde for riding Amtrak or that you must argue in lower courts instead of before the U.S. Supreme Court.

True service does mean that if you are at Cleary Gottlieb, you opt at some point for the externship with the Mobilization for Youth legal services office, or if you are at Davis Polk, you volunteer for its federal court pro bono panel. In seeking service, your single-minded goal is to look for service opportunities in any arena that comes your way throughout the course of your legal career.

The service road is often circuitous. But along the way, pack some timeless principles as you seek to serve. Wherever you disembark—private practice, government, or public interest—for however long you tarry at Arnold and Porter, the American Civil Liberties Union, the Justice Department, AIDS Legal Referral, Ford Motor Company,

or the National Women's Law Center, be led by the four principles of service.

The first and overriding principle is this:

Serve irrespective of class or status distinctions.

The second principle of service is this:

Serve in small as well as big matters.

"I have helped people with problems ranging from mortgage foreclosures to domestic violence. I have helped keep a hospital open in a poor community, [and] have assisted clients in changing the arbitrary admission system of the local housing authority."³ Those are the words of Lois Wood, spoken at a time when she was a legal services attorney in East Saint Louis.

She is not alone in servicing what some might call small matters. There are hundreds of legal services workers throughout the country, Wood points out, who also achieve good results for individual clients, who have had victories that have improved the lives of many people, and who still



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derive great satisfaction from practicing law on behalf of those who cannot otherwise afford an attorney.

You have probably never heard of Lois Wood. Perhaps Gerry Spence is more familiar; he is one who serves in big matters. Spence's clients have included Karen Silkwood and Randy Weaver. Spence is one of the few attorneys connected with the big-deal event, though because of the media exposure given those of his ilk, his group seems legion. Whether you are involved in a big-deal case or are serving in small matters, all clients deserve your professional best.

I am partial to the following sentiment from Helen Keller, because it illustrates the all-too-human desire to perform big acts while also acknowledging that the biggest acts of all are the small things done consistently, done well: "I long to accomplish a great and noble task, but it is my chief duty to accomplish humble tasks as though they were great and noble. The world is moved along, not only by the mighty shoves of its heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker."⁴

The third principle of service is this:

Serve with civility.

Civility is sorely needed in our increasingly smug, mean-spirited public discourse. In its "Aspirational Statement on Professionalism," the Georgia Supreme Court states:

The Court believes there are unfortunate trends of commercialization and loss of professional community in the current practice of law. These trends are manifested in an undue emphasis on the financial reward of practice, a lack of courtesy and civility among members of our profession, a lack of respect for the judiciary and for our system of justice, and a lack of regard for others and for the common good. . . .

As a community of professionals, we should strive to make the internal rewards of service, craft, and character, and not the external reward of financial gain, the primary rewards of the practice of law.

We should remember, and we should help our clients remember, that the way in which our clients resolve their disputes defines part of the character of our society and we should act accordingly.⁵

We need aspirational ideals to help bind us together in a professional community—and as a humane society. The specific acts and gestures will vary, but the purpose is always the same: to acknowledge others and affirm their worth.

The fourth principle of service is this:

Serve with humility.

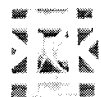
"You know why they bury lawyers in graves dug twelve feet deep? Because they hear that deep down lawyers are good people." Where do these lawyer jokes come from? Why are they so vicious?

According to a 1993 American Bar Association survey, fewer than one in five respondents felt the phrase "caring and compassionate" described lawyers. The survey shows a public perception of a profession that has become at worse contemptuous and at best indifferent to the people it seeks to serve. The survey further concludes that too many respondents have been exposed to the segment of lawyers whose desk-side manners smack of arrogance.

Service to clients, to the profession, and to the community should not be an ostentatious exhibition of how much lawyers know and laypeople don't know; rather it should be about how useful our talents are to others. The more enlightened will undoubtedly agree with the contention of John Ruskin that the highest reward for toil is not what one gets for it but what one becomes by it.

Class of 1996, the faculty has taught you well, and you have toiled long and hard. My colleagues and I will await to see what you will become by it. We know that you will, in essence, become what you do. Choose wisely.

Remember: You as an individual, through choice, have personal control over the turns your legal career will take. That control will, I hope, be driven by the depth of your commitment and the breadth of your integrity, by the weight of your ethics and the height of your conviction.



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There are so many arenas where lawyers can choose to serve. We need lawyers inside and outside the mainstream to forge the most responsive legal system in the world.

We need lawyers for the Open Society Institute's Forced Migration Project, the Native American Legal Rights Fund, and the Mutual Housing Association of New York. We need lawyers for the Rainforest Foundation International, the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Debt-for-Development Coalition, and Voluntary Lawyers for the Arts. We need lawyers for the Asian-American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund, and the Mexican-American Legal Defense Fund. We need lawyers for the Harlem Restoration Project, Project LIFE, the Environmental Defense Fund, and Acts Contributing to Solutions for the Homeless.

The list is infinite, because the ills of our society are so great. Just think about it: A system designed to be blind to justice seems also to have become blind to injustice.

In closing, class of 1996, I would like to leave you with these thoughts: Before my mother was born, women could not vote. Before I was born, black men and women could not vote in certain areas of the country. Before you were born, gays and lesbians had best stay in the closet. Before my father was born, blacks and whites could not legally marry in some states. Before I was born, pro-choice was not a bumper sticker. Before you were born, battered wives found little redress in the justice system. Before any progress came about, a lawyer, bent on service, stepped forward to answer the need of the one, achieving results that ultimately benefited the many. Can you do less for America's unborn?

Class of 1996, avoid the midlife crisis. Ask now, today, and every day: What is the meaning of my life? Why was I placed on this earth? at this time? with these skills? in this country? in this community? this law firm? this government agency? this nonprofit organization?



Professor Taylor giving the faculty address during the final convocation of the class of 1996

The answer to all those questions has one simple response: to serve your clients, to serve your profession, and to serve your community without respect to status or recognition, and to do so with civility and humility.

Class of 1996, I wish you well.

Winnie F. Taylor is on leave of absence from the law school to serve as associate provost of Cornell University.

1. David Berg, "Is There a Future for Trial Lawyers? An Open Letter to Law Students," 40 *S.D. L. Rev.* 228, 229 (1995).
2. Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: A Path to Spiritual Growth* (1988).
3. Lois Wood, "As Legal Services Attorney: Working for the Community," in *Women Lawyers: Perspectives on Success* 77, 81 (Emily Couric ed., 1984).
4. Attributed to Helen Keller in Charles L. Wallis, *The Treasure Chest* 240 (1983).
5. Georgia Code of Professional Responsibility, Rule 9-102 (1992).



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