



**WSBA President
Steven G. Toole**

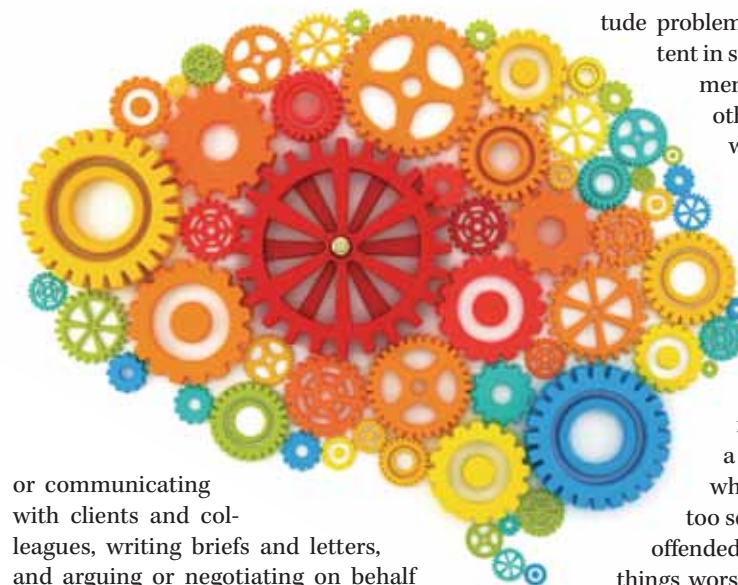
Wisdom

What is wisdom? When does one become wise? When did people start listening when I spoke and not just say “Yeah, but...”? Attorneys are educated and intelligent. One doesn’t get to law school without having first graduated from high school and college. To attend law school, a person had to have good grades in college and scored well on the LSAT. Then that person had to get through three years of law school, graduate, and pass the bar exam. However, despite all this

education and brain power, some of us can be oh-so-dumb.

I think back to when I was a young attorney. Perhaps many of us were too smart for our own good. We were know-it-alls. We may have felt superior to our clients, family members, witnesses, and just about anyone who was not a lawyer. Most of us probably weren’t very good at masking our arrogance and righteousness (am I only speaking for myself here?). We’d just spent three years learning how to think, analyze, talk, and argue. We didn’t learn how to listen — or if we did, I missed that class. Is it any wonder that not everyone believes that attorneys are so smart and great?

At some point, after starting a family, raising kids, and getting involved in school and community activities, I began to realize that there was more to life than being right all the time. As the years went by, I experienced more. I had friends, family, and colleagues who lost their jobs or had other financial difficulties; who suffered from depression or had other serious health problems; and some died at way too early an age. Others had children who attempted suicide or got in trouble with the law. Eventually I was better able to put my life in perspective. I began to appreciate that my little world of going to the office or court every morning, getting on the computer and researching the law,



or communicating with clients and colleagues, writing briefs and letters, and arguing or negotiating on behalf of my clients, was just a small part of life. *Most people don’t have a clue as to what we do, nor do they care. They have their own lives, problems, and priorities. In their entire lives, they may never need to consult with or hire an attorney.*

This is when I started to *wise up*. Instead of utilizing my education, intelligence, and confident attitude to prove that I was right and to win, either for me or my clients, I started to look for ways that everyone could win. I started to be conscious of the belief that there are ways that we can act such that everyone can

have a more satisfying and fulfilling life. I began to appreciate the concept of *win-win*. Now I realize that I am generalizing here. Obviously there are times when you have to pursue an all-or-nothing result. If one attorney is prosecuting a person who is alleged to be a serial murderer and the other attorney is defending that person, you likely won’t end up with a *win-win* result. So, bear with me here as I choose to focus on the more theoretical.

An age-old question among lawyers is why people don’t like or respect us. I believe that some of the reasons are the attitude

problems that are persistent in so many lawyers, as mentioned above. Another reason is that we, as a group, are often either unable or unwilling to laugh at ourselves. We get offended at lawyer jokes, which, in my opinion, is just more evidence of a group of people who takes itself far too seriously. By getting offended, we only make things worse. This does nothing to change the public perception — and we wonder why lawyers don’t have credibility among the public and why people question our honesty and integrity.

Many of us started our careers believing we had to let people know how smart we were in order to get business. We may have believed that we had to talk tough with our clients, and in doing so, perhaps we promised the moon instead of reality. We did this to keep our clients. Then we believed we had to *win* so that our clients would come back and refer others. At this stage, there may have been little if any

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room for compromise or compassion. *We had not yet experienced enough losses in our lives, enough humiliation, or enough heartbreak to appreciate what our clients may have been going through or fearing.* As we had more and more of these experiences, we began to see things from a different perspective; we began to understand how what we did affected everyone around us, our lives, and our world. *We began to gain wisdom.*

Some people are fortunate to gain wisdom at an earlier age than others. Perhaps they were old souls and went through much adversity in prior lives. Perhaps they benefitted from a sage parent or mentor, or had a wise spouse or partner who taught them much. Wouldn't it be nice if we could all gain this wisdom at an early age? I find myself wondering what our world would be like if everyone could be wise at a point in life when they were young, vibrant, and full of energy and had a lot of time to influence others and accomplish good deeds. Now that I'm older and am fortunate to have maybe nine people who listen to what I have to say, I would urge all of us to remember this most important attribute — *listen*. Listen to your clients, colleagues, families (including children), friends, and people you encounter in the streets and the malls. Open your ears to everyone and as I've said before, be willing to be wrong. Learn from what you hear and observe, and then live what you learn and share it with others. This is wisdom. 

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