

The Old Lion



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Chair | CMBA Young Lawyers Section

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It was early Sunday afternoon. After an extended winter vacation the sun finally showed up for work, warming the breeze enough to give it a feeling of strolling through crisp, clean sheets. It was a perfect day for a walk with my wife. So, naturally, I decided to go catch up on some e-mail and write this column at one of the many coffee shops I frequent. How's that for an inability to prioritize?

After checking enough e-mail to wind me up for the forthcoming week, I tackled the real task at hand. I was a few hundred keystrokes into a piece on five things every young lawyer should know. The words were flowing. Things were good. I was going to make that walk just yet. Suddenly, my rhythm was derailed by the twang of a cheap doorbell echoing from the rear of the shop, announcing the arrival of a new customer.

I wandered the Old Lion.

No, this particular coffee shop isn't in the middle of an exotic petting zoo. The Old Lion is an elderly man that frequents the java hut. In fact, some would argue that it's *his* java hut in which we're all guests. He's a bigger fellow, with a head of thick, white hair and weathered skin. He walks with a labored but purposeful gait, complementing a similar gleam in his eyes—which is the key to understanding the Old Lion.

Among other things, the Old Lion seems to pride himself on overseeing the on-goings at the coffee shop, in particular with respect to the college-aged girls behind the counter. They take shifts feeding him an assortment of fresh pastries, bagels and other goodies. Fare fit for this King, who's partial to cheesecake.

I know what you may be thinking and you're wrong. The Old Lion isn't a "dirty old man." From what I've observed, he takes a genuine interest in the girls. He asks about their studies and what they plan to do with their lives, taking care to encourage even the most outrageous of aspirations. On occasion I've noticed him stare down potential suitors paying unannounced visits to the girls, carefully evaluating their credentials. I sometimes wonder if the slouches among them know how close they are to catching a swift paw across the face.

Today, the Old Lion carried with him a plastic bag. I couldn't tell at first what was in it, but as he passed slowly before me I peeked over the blind that was my laptop to notice flower stems emerging from the bag's open end.

This is gonna be good, I thought, shifting in my seat to get a better view of the action.

The Old Lion sauntered up to the counter, paying me no notice. Alert to the contents of the bag, the girl behind the register became visibly unsettled. I could almost hear every bad line she'd ever used to let down would-be prom dates screaming through her head. Her darting eyes made it clear that none came close to applying here.

"These are for you" the Old Lion proudly growled, gently drawing the flowers from the bag as if presenting a kill. The flowers were numerous, colorful.

And fake.

By this time, another girl working the shift appeared from the back. After quickly assessing the situation, she shot me a confused look. I immediately ducked behind my electronic blind. *This* jackal wasn't about to come between the Old Lion and his pride.

The flower girl hesitated, accepting the gift only after her polite resistance bordered on offensive.

[†]The Old Lion is far more interesting than another piece on five things every young lawyer should know (because, of course, we all know everything there is to know about practicing law anyhow).

"Why did you get these for me?" she asked, earning a daytime Emmy after raising the bouquet to her nose and inhaling deeply. Even the Old Lion, who's perhaps not as sharp as he used to be, looked a bit perplexed by the maneuver.

"Because tomorrow's your birthday" he responded with a tone of obviousness in his voice. "Everybody should get flowers on their birthday and I can't come in to give them to you tomorrow."

"I don't know what to say," the girl stammered. How about "thank you?" I almost wondered aloud. The Old Lion beat me to the punch.

"Just say 'thank you.' That's all you have to do when somebody does something nice for you. Just say 'thank you.'" Well put, Old Lion. Well put.

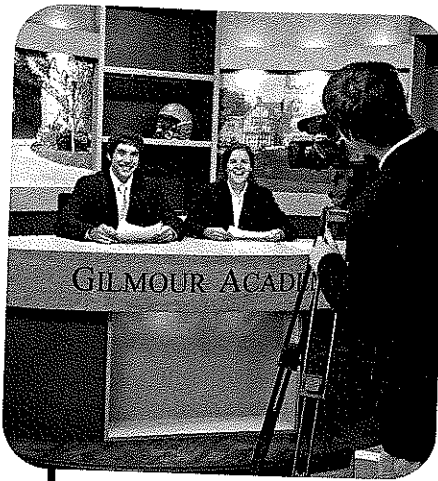
"Thank you," she mumbled, appearing perplexed at the simplicity behind accepting goodwill. In an obvious effort to divert attention elsewhere, the girl asked whether the Old Lion wanted some cheesecake.

"Not today. I've got some more work to do." The Old Lion turned from the counter and headed back from where he came, his final words resonating in my head. "I've got some more work to do." I knew then that this delivery wasn't just a random act of kindness by the Old Lion. It was much more. It was a deliberate fulfillment of *purpose*. As insignificant as the Old Lion's watch over the java hut may seem to others, to the Old Lion it's a large part of his purpose in this world. What it means to others is irrelevant. What's relevant is that it means something to *him* and *his* day-to-day life.

No sooner than the tip of the Old Lion's tail passed through the closing door, did the girls begin mocking him. They usually do after he visits. I don't think they've taken enough laps around the calendar to appreciate that genuine acts of goodwill aren't tossed out like candy from parade floats. When they do, I'm sure they'll remember the Old Lion and then get one of those afterthoughts that steal your wind, causing you to pause wherever you are to shake your head in self disgust—emotional karma at its finest.

So does the Old Lion even pertain to a young lawyer's practice? Absolutely!¹ The Old Lion, in fact, goes much further by illustrating the significance of purpose in a young lawyer's *life*. Without it, you're just going through the motions. What fun is that?

Be certain that you're always seeking your true purpose; that you're fulfilling your true purpose when it's found; your purpose, and, as important, that you're fostering purpose in others—because someday you'll be an old lion, too. ☺



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