

# Balance rights with responsibility

**L**awyers are very busy right now helping make certain that each of us is treated fairly under the law and that our rights are preserved. You won't hear any lawyer jokes from me though, because I am deeply grateful that we have adversarial and advocacy traditions that make sure, as far as possible, that everyone's rights are preserved.

But there is a shadow side to all this. Fascination and insistence upon our rights can create a chilling effect upon a human value that is just as important as human rights.

That "other" value is human meaning, with its companion values of purpose to live by and commitment to stand for. This other value is sometimes forgotten when we or our lawyers insist on our rights.

If I am too careful to demand my rights to do whatever I wish, I may become so addicted to the elixir of freedom that I forget the cup of meaning that holds the freedom and keeps it free as well as drinkable. Freedom by itself can become the random running water of impulse, like the water of a flooded valley or a swamp. But freedom with a vision and a goal is like water in a river with banks on each side. They take the water on a real journey. Those banks are the meanings and goals we live for and aim toward.

Ironically, the social generosity of a nation or family can become the enemy of our soul if it gives us the benefits of food and money without our own contributions of work, goal and meaning. Then we treat the food and money as an entitlement that goes with membership in society, but we take no essential responsibility either for the larger world of people and environment or for ourselves.

This (narrow insistence upon rights) is a very growth-resistant shadow to live under and, if we do it for very long, we will cease to grow at all. The shadow actually weakens our ability to act creatively. This is why money without a job to do and obligations to meet and visions to fulfill is one of the best ways to kill culture.

Very few people have actually been enriched in what matters most by a large legacy of money unless there is an equal sense of purpose and vision to go with it. It is more important

for a family to leave mission than money to children.

We all can tell stories that explain the point. I know of a young man who was adrift in his school work and who was developing destructive behavior patterns. But at just the right moment, someone in his family, asked him a new question: "Well, what would you really like to do if you could?"

He said that he would like to build a boat. His father was not impressed at first by the idea, but the two of them decided to do it — the lad during weekday afternoons and his father with him on weekends. As a result, this young boat builder found a river with his name on it. His life became more meaningful when he had found a vision to take hold of.

Each human being needs respect from other people and respect for our rights. Without this freedom we are only trained in compliance, and someone else's goals become the all-important river banks for our lives. I understand how some would prefer a swamp or a flood to that, because it is dehumanizing to live out someone else's purpose. But why should I settle for the choice between the oppression of an imposed purpose and the oppression of no purpose? A better way mixes together freedom and meaning.

When Stephen Hawking was an undergraduate at Cambridge University he was bored with his schooling, and with that boredom he became a young alcoholic. He resisted his courses and wrote exams that mocked his professors' questions. He needed a boat to build in order to save both his sanity and his brilliant mind for the world.

Fortunately for us, one professor at Cambridge cared about the young man inside the careless and defiant student.

This professor gave him an assignment too vast to ignore, even for a bored student. He said to Hawking, "Don't worry about the physics theories we are trying to solve in this class. I have another problem for you. Solve for me the meaning of black holes."

That dare launched Stephen Hawking into astrophysics and toward a life long vision. Today Stephen Hawking, the Isaac Newton Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge University, is the world's leading student of black holes and probably of the whole field of astrophysics.

How do people become whole so that there is a vigorous mixture of freedom and free spirit together with commitment and meaning? It happens when our demand for rights is not one ounce heavier on the scales than our willingness to work for a good purpose.

This balance keeps us fresh when we are young and when we are old, too. It keeps us growing when we are young because it makes us more concerned to learn and do than to have and consume. It keeps retirement years healthy because we know our discipleship has no retirement age boundaries.

We are grateful for society's help when we are unemployed or handicapped or vulnerable for any of many complicated reasons. But even this entitlement must not become the shadow that teaches us how to work a system of help and, in so doing, whittles away our own growth and self confidence.

This is why ministries of helping others need to be carried on with great skill and balance. We need to help each other in ways that confer dignity and genuinely empower those who are helped to become helpers of others.

The best river of all is when the boundaries of my energy, my giftedness and my life are boundaries of God's grace and God's purpose. God designed my life and understands how I best work. I believe that is what St. Paul meant when he said, "The love of Christ holds me together" (II Corinthians 5:14).

I thrive best of all when my life is a river that has as its strong banks the faithful love of God. Then I am endorsed to be what I was meant to be, not what someone else wants me to be. This is freedom at its deepest and it is meaning, too.