

President's Column - Let's Dance In The Rain

by Patrick Dankwa John

"There's a time for everything under the heavens...a time to mourn and a time to dance." Ecclesiastes 3:1

It's been said that life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass. It's about learning how to dance in the rain. That sage advice seems particularly hard to follow given what we've experienced in 2020, and are still living through. Over the last year, we've all been living through a pandemic that has taken lives, wrecked the economy, and sprayed gasoline on our nation's smoldering racial tensions. As the year 2020 came to a close, most of us welcomed 2021 with hope. We thought to ourselves that things had to get better—they certainly couldn't get any worse than 2020. Then our nation's Capitol was stormed by a disillusioned angry mob, forcing our elected officials to literally run for their lives.

As I write this message, our nation is still in shambles. Our COVID-19 vaccination efforts have been pedestrian: slow, geographically inconsistent, and racially skewed. Trump is going through his second impeachment trial, for allegedly inciting the mob to storm the Capitol. We are as politically divided now as we were just before the presidential election in 2020. Thousands of hungry unemployed Americans are no longer awakened in the morning by their alarm clocks. They're now awakened by the grumbling in their stomachs—reminding them that it's time to get up and rush to a food bank, where they will wait in a line that may stretch for miles.

In these circumstances, it's easy to despair and become lethargic. I've had to snap myself out of emotional numbness several times over the last year. I had to become my own motivational speaker—talking myself out of despondence and anxiety. Perhaps you've had similar experiences. A year ago, I never thought our woes would be with us a year later, with no clear end in sight. With so much tragedy all around us, sometimes I feel any ambition other than directly saving a human life is trivial. Sometimes I feel like the Roman Emperor Nero, whose name has lived in infamy for supposedly playing a fiddle while Rome was burning. Let me share some of my personal challenges with you—my personal storm experiences, in the hope that you find some encouragement if you ever feel hopeless in the face of our nation's challenges.

I'm originally from Guyana, South America. Guyana is the second poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere—second in poverty only to Haiti. I lived in Guyana during some of my teenage years. There were food shortages and government rationing of certain food items, like wheat. Sometimes bakeries had to be protected by mounted police when bread was being sold. Physical fights would break out over a loaf of bread. There were times when I got in line at the bakery at 4 am so that when it opened at 6 am, I'd have a decent chance of getting a loaf of bread. And when I say a loaf of bread, I mean exactly that: a single loaf, because it was rationed. Only one loaf per pair of hands.

Watching the COVID-19 food lines here in America brought back those unpleasant memories for me. In February 2020, I found myself, at the age of 51, in the hospital with a heart attack. In the next month, March 2020, my father, who lived in New York City, caught COVID-19 and died within 24 hours of arriving at the hospital. The last time I had seen my father was in late 2018, when I was in New York eulogizing my older brother, who had died of heart disease at the age of 59. My father was very proud I was going to become president of Decalogue. Of course, he told me he would come to Chicago for Decalogue's installation dinner to watch me get sworn in. The Installation was scheduled to take place on June 25, 2020. He wouldn't miss it for all the world.

When he died in March 2020, we couldn't even have a funeral for him. At the time, New York was the nation's COVID-19 hotspot, with bodies being warehoused in ice trucks. I had to have him cremated in New York while I remained in Chicago. At this point, with my recent heart attack, I had a comorbidity that made it unwise for me to travel anywhere. It took a month to get him cremated, and even longer for me to get his urn delivered to me.

In late June 2020, I eagerly anticipated my June 25th swearing in as Decalogue president. At the same time, I was mourning the loss of my father, and frustrated that his ashes were still in New York. The day before my swearing in, on June 24, my father's urn was delivered to my home. Just as he had promised, he was in town to watch me get sworn in. My father was a man of his word.

This is what was going on in my life as I accepted the greatest professional honor I'd ever received—being sworn in as president of the Decalogue Society of Lawyers. I couldn't get the image of my father's urn—by then prominently displayed on my bookcase at home--out of my mind. I fought to hold back tears during my acceptance speech. I had a speech to make, and many people were on the edge of their seat waiting to hear it. I didn't have time to wait for the storm to end. I had to dance in the rain. This is life. We are simultaneously showered with both blessings and burdens, joy and sadness.

What does all of this have to do with the Decalogue Society? Everything. Decalogue is an organization bursting at the seams with brilliant lawyers and judges. But we're not just brilliant lawyers and judges. We are first and foremost just people. I think we too often focus on the mechanics of doing our job, while we neglect our own humanity. We have fears and doubts. We experience joy and sadness. Our emotions affect us, those around us, and those who depend on us. It's ok to cry and pray, and take a break sometimes.

There's a time for everything. We should give ourselves permission to feel the full range of human emotions—we're not robots. When the time for crying is done, we must return to our calling. We help people. That's what we do.

Despite the pandemic, Decalogue's activities are as robust as ever. We have continued to have CLEs and seminars like nobody's business. Of course, all of our events have been virtual because of the pandemic (hey, I said you should dance in the rain, I didn't say not to have an umbrella). We continue to lend our voice to the cause of justice as loudly now, as ever before.

The community's need for our talents has grown even more acute in the past year. While sometimes it may feel like we're playing the fiddle while Rome is burning, let me assure you we're not. We're helping to rebuild a razed community. If you're not a Decalogue member, I invite you to join us. If you are a member, be encouraged as you work hard to live out Decalogue's motto, "justice, justice you shall pursue". Don't wait for the storm to pass. Dance in the rain.

Thank you for giving me the privilege of serving as your president.