

Miles Apart

It's Calgary 1995; articling interview; three seasoned litigators are rapidly drilling through the usual interrogation, until one interviewer asks, "Where are you from?" Having recently moved to Calgary, I quickly replied, "Edmonton." The interviewer persists, "No, where are you really from?" The others looked visibly uncomfortable, and quickly redirected the conversation.

Now, I am sure we can debate whether the question was appropriate. I am pleased to say the interview went well; an offer of employment ensued. Perhaps the question was a way to find a connection, rather than place of origin, foreign accent, or colour of skin bearing on the decision at hand. Practically, I was far too focused on securing articles to even consider being offended (remember, this was the early 90's). I won't reveal whether I accepted the offer, in case it exposes the firm. The reality is that I was quite oblivious to being "different."

So what does diversity mean in the 21st Century, and are we there yet? On a recent visit to India, I observed that smart phones are commonplace, where electrical power is not. Is the worldwide web an equalizer? We can befriend anyone around the globe, sharing our lives, activities, and our deepest, darkest secrets. Ivy league experts share their knowledge and wisdom at a click of a button; inventions, cultural, and social phenomena are conveyed in the span of a Ted-talk. So, are cultural, educational, and social barriers breaking down?

Perhaps I am raising more questions than I can answer. The issue came to light once again on my recent visit to Africa. Global Affairs Canada and the Canadian Bar Association invited me to participate in an educational conference for Kenyan judges. I couldn't resist the opportunity to share Canada's experience of helping members of our profession and judiciary cope with personal issues; it was also a chance to return to my birthplace: Nairobi, Kenya, (in final answer to the interviewer's question).

Admittedly, visiting Africa is not as straight forward as the all-inclusive vacay down South. Visits to the travel clinic resulting in a variety of inoculations and vaccinations made this quite clear. But on arrival, the weather (rainy season) was not dissimilar to the hub enroute, London's Heathrow (or Calgary's summer of 2016). Clearly, a side trip to Masai Mara where the airstrip is flanked by water buffalo is not a common landing site. And sure, maneuvering Calgary's construction zones on one's commute is a little less daunting than bypassing riot police on the way to work. Otherwise, Nairobi felt like any other major city.

A visit to provincial court: family and civil, also looked familiar, although there, Family court is filled with children, attending to satisfy the rule that the judge must "lay eyes on the child" before making a decision impacting them. Civil division was familiar, as counsel, armed with diaries, negotiate court dates.

The context of my visit was access to justice for children of Africa, helping the bar and judiciary build resilience against the cases and workload they handle. We began a discussion with bar leaders and the judiciary around personal issues, and

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how to prevent compassion fatigue, through peer support. It was against this background that we heard, first-hand, of the challenges Kenyans face: mass poverty, racial wars, high rates of crime, violence and suicide, political, economic and social struggles. Yes, Canada has its challenges; but I couldn't help think that we are worlds apart.

As Executive Director of Assist, what I found interesting is the impact of stress on the human condition. I learned that our experiences of trauma can be different, and yet we may be impacted similarly. The corollary is that we may experience the same trauma and be affected differently. Our response depends on our unique personality and resiliency. So yes, we can be miles apart, different, and yet the same, connected by our humanness.

And being connected is critical. Studies show the primary contributing factor to a mental illness persisting over time, is lack of peer support. Lack of social support trumps childhood trauma and severity of the trauma in prolonging a mental health condition. Seeing all kinds of personal problems affecting our profession, and seeing peer support in action, have shown me the power of shared experience in helping others.

Equally important is that we may share similar backgrounds, physical appearance, and attributes, and still have diverse lives, opinions and attitudes. This means sensitivity to others, such as minority groups, can be cultivated --regardless of our experience.

To me diversity is not just about different backgrounds, nor is our goal to be the same; differences can enrich our shared existence in this vast and varying world we call home. It is about freedom of thought, expression, and political views, and breaking down barriers, at home and abroad, to privileges and rights that equally belong to us all. 🌐



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Marian De Souza, QC, is the Executive Director of the Alberta Lawyers' Assistance Society. Marian is also a past president (2013-14) of the CBA Alberta Branch, and a past chair of the Agenda for Justice and Advocacy Committee.

FRONT AND CENTRE

Around Alberta



2016-17 CBA Alberta President Jeremiah Kowalchuk recognizes outgoing President Wayne Barkauskas at the October 4, 2016 meeting of Provincial Council.



CBA Alberta Executive Committee members Jenny McMordie, Wayne Barkauskas and Maureen Armitage meet with Kent Hehr, Minister of Veterans Affairs and Calgary Centre MP.

Assist Walk for Wellness 2016



Assist Walk for Wellness Calgary - September 22, 2016



Assist Walk for Wellness Edmonton - September 27, 2016



Assist Walk for Wellness Lethbridge - September 22, 2016



Assist Walk for Wellness Red Deer - September 27, 2016