

Zen Lawyer

CHAPTER 12



Every holiday season, I watch “It’s a Wonderful Life.” The first time I saw it without commercial breaks was in a cinema class at the University of Southern California in the 1980s. Cinema geeks, sorority girls, frat boys and aspiring artists of all kinds wept around me. For a couple of hours, everyone forgot about the dominant tone of the era, irony.

James Stewart plays George Bailey who, in a moment of frustration, wishes he had never been born. His wish is granted. He learns what the world would have been like without him. “Each man’s life touches so many other lives, when he isn’t around he leaves an awful hole, doesn’t he?”

The classic moments are many, including the ending where nearly the entire cast, most of whom George has helped in some fashion, rally for him. As they gather around a Christmas tree and sing “Auld Lang Syne,” George picks up a gift, a copy of Mark Twain’s “Tom Sawyer” inscribed with a message from Clarence the angel, “No man is a failure who has friends.”

In the Zen story “Friends,” two monks walked across a desert. During the long journey, they had an argument and one slapped the other. The one who was slapped was hurt, but he did not say anything. Instead, he wrote in the sand, *Today my friend slapped me in the face.*

They kept walking until they found an oasis where they bathed. The one who had been slapped started drowning, but his friend saved him. After he recovered from nearly drowning, he carved in stone, *Today my best friend saved me.*

The friend who had slapped and saved his best friend asked him, “After I hurt you, you wrote in the sand, and now, you carve on a stone, why?”

“When someone hurts us, we should write it down in sand, where the winds of time and forgiveness erase it away,” the other friend answered, “but when someone does something good for us, we must engrave it in stone where it cannot be erased by the winds of time.”

I’ve been blessed with remarkable friends. Many I met in my twenties when I was working as a writer. In my thirties, my circle expanded to include lawyers. Though a few of my interesting friends have been the casualties of drugs, alcohol, mental issues or misanthropy and we parted, most I’m still close with. The winds of time have not erased the good things

we did with each other and for each other. What bonded us once bonds us still.

The legal field, even more than the arts, tests friendships. There are constant opportunities for disagreements, deceptions, conflicts and kerfuffles. Faux friends can lure you into the mire of the profession.

In the midpoint of the second act of “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the antagonist, Mr. Potter, offers George a lucrative job, a seemingly easy way out of the challenges he faces. George almost accepts, but suddenly realizes Potter’s motives are selfish and sinister – he doesn’t care about George or the good George does for the community. Rather, Potter is miserable and wants company.

Someone appealing to our base instincts is not a friend. Someone appealing to our higher instincts, to the better angels of our nature, is either Abraham Lincoln or a possible friend.



As a Zen lawyer, cultivate good friendships. Value good friendships. Engrave good friendships in stone.

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