

Parable #8 - Just Get It Done



Advocacy Club Parable #8: Just Get ‘Er Done

by John Hollander, 960 words

The tendency to distraction is not restricted to Millennials. All professionals are prone to failing to set, and abide by, the priorities necessary to get through big projects. The solution is blindingly simple and is taught in CPD classes across the spectrum of professions. This parable presents the solution in the form of flash fiction.

South Park, present day

Try as he might, Jake Murphy couldn't seem to get to the project on his desk, preparation for an upcoming trial on behalf of the State Attorney-General's office. He knew this was the chance to showcase his talents to a senior litigator, his manager Francine Dupuis, who would serve as lead counsel. There was even the prospect that Jake could examine and cross a few minor witnesses in this case of a fraudulent securities scam.

So, what was stopping him? Damned emails, that's what. He had dozens in his Outlook inbox, each more pressing than the previous one. He'd answer two, one would bounce back with an incorrect address, and another would appear, even more demanding. Argh! To worsen his mood, another email popped up with 'ASAP!!!' in the re: line. Double argh!

Jake looked away from his computer to the window of his 8 x 10 foot office in the courthouse. His first two years had been in private practice, initially for a mid-size firm and then as a partner in a start-up firm he had helped found with a few colleagues when the first one imploded. To this point, Jake had reacted to events, demands, and instructions from clients, managers, opposing lawyers, and

judges. Everyone seemed to have an agenda but Jake, or that's how he felt. And now he had a deadline that could take his career to the next level. There was a maxim among lawyers. Nothing focuses the attention like a trial date. And that's what he faced. How could he take control?

In desperation, Jake called his former law partner and occasional mentor, Marianne Adams. Their relationship had gotten off to a rocky start in Jake's first year as Marianne used him as a pawn in her plan to oust a rival in the law firm where Jake juniored. But there was no denying that Marianne had mastered the art of grabbing hold of a project and wrestling it to the ground. He could rely on her for practical and sage advice on practice management techniques.

He called her at the law school, where she taught trial advocacy to upper-year students.

"How can I help you, Jake? You never call unless you're in a jam."

Marianne was always direct with him. Blunt even.

"Too true, Marianne. Francine and I have a trial in two weeks. I'm in charge of witness preparation. It's a big case, branching off the securities fraud case you settled."

"That we settled, former partner. You played a big role, too. How can I help with your witness prep?"

"I keep trying to get to it, but there are too many distractions. Emails from opposing counsel in my other cases, from colleagues here at the A-G. Why can't people just leave me alone to do my job?"

"Easy now, Jake. It's a good thing you're busy, right? You need that as a young junior associate."

“So says the academic with no opposing lawyers, judges, or clients yelling at you. Making demands.”

“You think students, faculty and the Dean are less demanding? Their agendas are always more important than mine, or so they think. It’s the same exact thing.”

“How do you get through the day? I mean, getting anything accomplished?”

“The solution is simple, really. Are you up for some Q&A?”

“Like my first year with you? Sure, Obi-Wan.”

“What’s more important, your witness prep or keeping your inbox empty?”

“That’s obvious.”

“Then say it aloud, Jake.”

“Uhhh, witness prep.”

“Did the A-G’s office assign you any support staff?”

“Yes, I had them hire Nicole Green out of her retirement. She’s still great. Reads me like a book.”

“OK, then. We’re done. Put your email account on ‘out-of-office’ and direct people to contact Nicole. Tell Nicole not to bother you, except with emergencies at the end of the day. Voila, you’re ready for serious witness prep.”

“But won’t there be deadlines we can’t meet without negotiation?”

“No, Jake, there won’t. You’re not that important. Nicole can buy you some time by explaining that you’re busy elsewhere. What if you got COVID or were hit by a bus? Trust me. Everyone will cut you the slack you need.”

“Does that work for you, Marianne?”

“It always has and always will. That’s the cost of doing business with me. People have to do it on my terms. One of my terms is that I deal with the important stuff first, not last.”

“Don’t they all think their ‘stuff’ is important?”

“Maybe, but there isn’t much that other folks can do about your decision. If they act unilaterally, a judge will come down on them hard for not accommodating you. That’s just the way it is in our world. Take advantage of it.”

“Thanks, Marianne. I’ll give it a try.”

“While I have you, can you help me teach trial advocacy this semester? I have a roomful of Jakes, and they’re all so needy!”

You can accommodate others, or you can do your job. Often, the choice is as stark as that. Peace of mind comes from doing good work thoroughly. And that requires focus and commitment. By relegating simple and quick tasks to a fixed period at the end of the day, you can accomplish the projects that give you the most satisfaction. And that’s why you became a lawyer in the first place.