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The power of maintaining consistent non-anger and reaching calm harmony.

Â Yin Yang.Â Practicing life and law as a harmonious whole. Ten years ago, I flew to Dubois, Wyoming, for the Trial Lawyers College Reunion at the Thunderhead Ranch. After dinner, we got together at the big barn to start the transition towards re-focusing on the lessons of the TLC and away from the daily hustle-bustle that challenges doing so. One exercise was to break into groups of three and actively and deeply to engage each other in discussion about our feelings, struggles, and accomplishments in life (in life as a whole, not just in our professions). In my trio was a man I knew well and another I had just met. Two years before, the man I knew well confronted me with the following within about a week of meeting me: He felt disconnected from me because I reminded him of a nemesis of his, some lawyer from Boston; he hunted his whole life and I was a vegetarian for ethical reasons; he thought I was more of a chameleon than someone who showed his true colors right away (that was a curious observation when I was trying to make sense of being thrown together with four dozen experienced trial lawyers in the middle of nowhere and away even from cellphone reception for five weeks; in any event, by now I do not think anybody would get such a misimpression). Now, two years later, the hunting lawyer told me he finally understood me better, and saw me as a sea of calm. Although calmness has long been a goal of mine, it too often has been an elusive goal that has too often been trumped by my preoccupation with injustice, although the Dalai Lama has shown by example that calmness is possible and even necessary even in extremely trying circumstances. I chuckled at this hunting lawyer's misperception about my calmness, and told him that it was easy for me to be calm hundreds of miles away from opponents, judges, work, and other things that challenged my calm. As I have said before, an angry litigator is a weakened litigator, just as an angry competitor is a weakened competitor. Consequently, it is critical that I focus on achieving harmony and calm harmony. I have written many times about reaching a calm and harmonious life, including here, here, here, and here. What do I do to achieve this calm harmony? When at my best, I practice daily t'ai chi, and apply t'ai chi principles to every aspect of my daily life. I hold the Dalai Lama as a role model for maintaining calm, non-anger, and non-violence -- even towards those who wish me harm -- when he has experienced the pain from decades of violence and other human rights violations against his Tibetan sisters and brothers. I look up to Claude AnShin Thomas, who became a mendicant Buddhist monk years after killing hundreds of people in Vietnam. He still gets angry, but now accepts the feeling, tries to dissipate it by focusing on his breath and on the sound of a bell that he carries. I also look up to my most key trial law teacher, Steve Rench, who is calmness personified, and who has helped show me that neither charisma, pizzazz, nor innate trial ability are prerequisites to becoming a great trial lawyer. Finally, and seriously, I look up to Frank Zappa, who apparently cursed the rampant mediocrity found in society, but did not let it debilitate him from being anything but mediocre himself. Also, Frank Zappa is an important example for me of how it is possible to be a caring and nurturing parent without surrendering to mainstream society, American Idol, America's Top 40, and Barney. A critical gap for me to bridge is the calmness I feel interacting with birds of a feather on the one hand (and in solitary moments), and, on the other hand, maintaining that same level of calmness when battling my worst enemy, appearing before a difficult judge, or even coping with highway drivers willing to put me in the hospital when only seeming to care about getting to their destination as fast as possible. I did not learn strong skills at maintaining calm at all times until I started studying and practicing t'ai chi thirteen years ago. Growing up, nobody showed me (or else I just did not hear nor heed them enough) that it was cool to walk away from a fight, whether it be a fistfight in the schoolyard or a game of heartless dozens. Additionally, I did not feel like I was living in surroundings all that mellow until after I started practicing t'ai chi. Consequently, while learning to reach and maintain calm and harmony, I have had to undo thirty-one years of insufficient calm and harmony. Sometimes, maintaining daily calm in the face of so much adversity (or, at least, the perception of adversity) is akin to being a recovering alcoholic who looks at each day of sobriety as an accomplishment. Clearly, reaching full calm requires keeping the calm throughout the day and in all instances. One cannot successfully turn on the calm faucet and then the anger faucet. Once the anger faucet is opened, it stays on and builds up with a fury. On the other hand, anger should not be bottled up inside, as Claude AnShin Thomas so successfully demonstrates by accepting the feeling of anger and trying to dissipate it by focusing on his breath and on the sound of a bell that he carries. (Other people may need to verbalize their anger; this should be done as calmly as possible, with "I" statements rather than with finger-pointing "you" statements). Everything and everyone are ultimately connected. The more I live calmness, show caring to others, productively deal with anger, and inject sincere and balanced humor into my words and actions (lest people mistake my calmness for aloofness), the more all of those qualities are contagious. My calmness does not show I have backed down from my strongly-held beliefs and passions. In fact, anger and tension weaken me and make me less powerful in pursuing my passions, my life and my work. Likewise, an opponent who has lost control, who is in a mad rage, and whose neck vein is popping, is weak, and is positioned to be defeated all the more. Years ago, I put much more currency in human excellence and social justice than in gentleness and calmness. By now, though, I know that the human heart and soul and calmness are inextricably intertwined for achieving true human excellence and social justice. Jon Katz.

Posted by Jon Katz in Persuasion at 06:00