

The Ways of an Ideal Judge

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To have served as one of Frank Coffin's law clerks is to have received the finest imaginable apprenticeship. For an entire year, my co-clerks and I were his students, helping him do his work and all the while absorbing life-changing lessons from his example. Here are six attributes of Judge Coffin that penetrated deeply into my consciousness, so deeply that I was moved to share them with a group of Chinese law students the week after he passed away.

1. Perfectionism. Judge Coffin wanted every bit of work he produced to be his best. He dreaded deciding a case wrongly, writing a bad opinion, even writing a bad sentence in a good opinion.

Some perfectionists aggressively impose this value on others, but Judge Coffin followed a different tack: Whenever we law clerks produced inadequate work, he acted as if we had tried our best but had come up short because we were incapable of better. He would always praise our effort. Then he would gently ask a question that laid bare our failings, prompting us to revise our work voluntarily. When we were beyond that stage, he would in the privacy of his chambers undertake a painstaking edit, in an immaculate if tiny hand.

The technique was a remarkable motivator. We did not want him to think that we lacked ability; we wanted him to think that we were great. Accordingly, we raised our level of professional care in order to increase the likelihood that he would conclude both that we were talented and that we shared his standards of quality.

2. Hard Work. Judge Coffin stayed up late at night, and he woke up early in the morning. He did whatever he needed to ensure that his work was perfect.

As was the case with his perfectionism, Judge Coffin never told us to work hard. Quite the contrary: he told us that we were his guests for the year in Maine and we should take time to explore and enjoy its many delights. And once again, we each chose to increase our level of work effort, as we came to emulate the Judge's sense of duty to our work.

3. Language. Judge Coffin loved words. Funny words, strange words – he loved finding the perfect word to capture his ideas. He read widely, and it delighted him whenever an author offered up a new word to incorporate into his repertoire.

We all loved the way the Judge wrote. We did our best to learn to write like him. We sought out *les mots justes* to express our (or his) thoughts. And we came to see the value of taking pains to write in ways that our readers would enjoy reading.

4. People. Judge Coffin believed that all people are important, and he believed that sometimes important people are less important than ordinary people. He was profoundly interested in what other people thought and said – especially those who seemed to be living more challenging lives. He was deeply concerned that the justice system might not hear the poor as clearly as it hears the rich, and he did his best to guard against that bias in his personal as well as his professional life.

Every Coffin clerk was touched by this aspect of our mentor. He taught us that listening – real listening – requires concentration and effort, but repays those investments many times over. And by his example he inspired us to commit some portion of our energies to making the world a little more just towards those less fortunate than we.

5. Fun. Judge Coffin loved to laugh. He thought life was funny and people were silly. He believed that the importance and seriousness of his work in no required him to take himself too seriously.

And so we took up the Judge's invitation to play jokes on each other, and on him. We played ridiculous games at his home. And we

came to appreciate how unbecoming the quality of self-importance really is.

6. Breadth. Judge Coffin developed all different aspects of himself. He was not only a great thinker, a great judge, and a great writer. He was also a great painter and a great sculptor.

Alas, artistic talent cannot simply be emulated. Concerning this quality, some of us had to draw a different lesson. Even if we could not create art ourselves, we came to value that talent in others and to want to make space in our lives to appreciate it when we saw it.

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To have spent a year as Judge Coffin's law clerk is to have received a priceless gift. Throughout the year, we marveled daily at how much we were learning. But perhaps the greatest measure of the man is that our sense of wonder and appreciation has grown ever deeper with the passage of time.