

Daily Journal

www.dailyjournal.com

VOL. 117 NO. 118

MONDAY, JUNE 20, 2011

A Lawyer Looks at 50

By Dan Lawton

As my 50th birthday approaches, with apologies to Jimmy Buffett ("A Pirate Looks at Forty"), here's a reflection on lessons I have learned.

The only time I get to talk to the jury and have them talk back is during voir dire. It's all very serious, but I still try to get them laughing. It's a long day for them to be sitting there listening to all the blah blah blah. And if they laugh, it brings us a little closer together.

I've been to the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro twice. No matter what happens to me the rest of my life, I won't forget how Africa looked from up there in the dark on those two cold clear mornings. You can see the curvature of the earth from up there.

I'm married to the best woman in the world. But I have a mistress. Her name is the Los Angeles Angels. I love both of them. Luckily Lisa approves.

As your lawyer, I'm not your friend. But I'll do things for you that your best friend can't, or won't. Years from now, don't let me hear you telling any lawyer jokes.

If I hadn't gone to law school, I'd have graduated from college radio into commercial radio and become a professional broadcaster. But I was too much of a coward to face the prospect of working years for low pay in small markets and maybe never making it big.

Don't tell me "no regrets." If you live an honest life, you've made some mistakes and regret some things. Learning from it and not dwelling on it is what you have to do.

Watching a lion jump a wildebeest, then the wildebeest fight for its life for 20 minutes, then two other lions help the first one finish the job, then the lions eat the wildebeest, was the most amazing thing I've ever seen in the outdoors. We were 50 yards away. I rooted for the wildebeest. But lions have to eat lunch too.

Lawyers and judges, let's admit it: Law beats up on justice every day.

When I hear you say, "I have to ask my client about the extension," I know the answer is going to be "no." So let's skip it, save some time, and clear the air. Just say "no" in the first place.

Being in the ocean on a winter morning and seeing the orange ball of the sun starting to peek over the horizon beats almost every other good feeling I can have about being alive.

If instead of going to all those Angels games I'd have worked on the novels I have in my head, how many novels would I have written by now?

Some lawyers whine about how much stress they're under, but they're babies. Stress is raising three kids, working as a night watchman in a shipyard on a dollar an hour, and making the mortgage every month. I never heard my grandfather complain about it.

Lawyers take a beating in the Coen brothers films — "*Intolerable Cruelty*," "*The Man Who Wasn't There*," "*Burn After Reading*." The lawyer characters appear as grasping, Machiavellian weasels. As a group, don't we deserve it just a little bit?

I love what the Catholic priests and nuns did for me. They were nothing but nice to me at all times. And I am comfortable in Catholic rituals. But Jesus didn't tell me to turn my brain off when I walk through the church door. If Jesus were to come back today, I expect he'd be appalled at a lot of what has been done in His name.

If both the mother-in-law and the wife need an immediate assist, help the mother-in-law first.

If your life after 40 isn't much better than it was before 40, you're doing it wrong.

Lawyers and judges, let's admit it: Law beats up on justice every day.

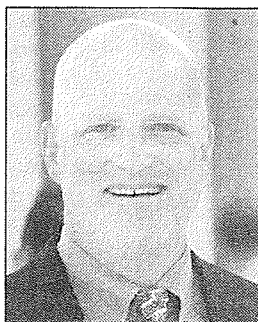
The best way to deal with a lawyer who's a jerk is to beat him in the courtroom.

According to my uncle, Bob Lawton, there were three things you had to do to practice law successfully: do excellent work, continually generate new clients, and bill and collect. He retired from practice in 1984. Today law practice is light years ahead of what it was in his time. Yet what he said is timeless for all lawyers in private practice everywhere.

You have to have some fun practicing law. If you don't, it's a long time to be in misery.

If asked to counsel a child on how best to pick a career, I might tell him, "Find your passion, but if possible, choose something that requires no homework."

If they replaced every Bible in every church and school and motel room with John Wooden's "*Wooden*," and the beatitudes with his "*Favorite Maxims*," we might have more virtue in the world.



Dan Lawton is the principal of Lawton Law Firm in San Diego. He specializes in intellectual property litigation and appellate litigation. He is an adjunct professor of law at Thomas Jefferson School of Law.