

Christian Legal Society Prayer Breakfast

December 3, 1999

Believe it or not ... by my calculation I've made about 2,000 presentations over the past 30 years. Sponsoring organizations have included just about every civic club in this state, as well as professional groups in 43 other states.

Audience size has ranged from several, to several thousand. I've probably accepted 99 out of every 100 invitations to speak publicly. As partial proof, I offer my extensive collection of rotary club plaques, certificates, pens, bowls, clocks, and bookmarks.

Hearing this, you might be thinking that I feel reasonably comfortable talking to you today. I assure you that isn't the case. As a matter of fact, I've declined each time in the past when a Christian organization asked me to speak, and I agonized this time before finally accepting Scott Makuakane's kind invitation. I don't really know why I said yes this time any more than I completely understand why I've always said no previously.

My hesitance and discomfort might be because I think it only natural at a prayer breakfast that you would expect me to talk about my own faith and what God means to me. Perhaps this says more about myself than I ought to reveal, but I find it difficult to talk about such things, even in private conversation.

Whenever I've tried to think hard about God, I've felt like I was trying to touch the stars, measure eternity, or change the past. I've wondered, "How could anyone describe God without thereby playing God?"

Even so, I'm determined to do my best this morning to talk, indirectly at least, about my faith and how it influences my life.

I happen to be a Catholic. The reason is simple. My parents were Catholic—as were their parents, and so on, all the way up the line for as far as we've been able to trace it. Being Catholic is more than just my religion, it's my culture ... it's a part of who I am and how I tend to make sense of the world around me.

Which reminds me of a very old story about two Irish Catholic workers who one day were digging a ditch in the red-light district of town, right in front of a particularly notorious house of ill-repute. According to the story, it wasn't long before the local protestant minister strolled by, walked up the steps of the house in question, rang the bell, and went right in. This upset Michael greatly: "Oh my. Patrick me boy, will you look at that. When a man like that, goes into a place like that, the world is going to the dogs." Patrick nodded in agreement and the two of them went back to work. But it wasn't long before the local Jewish rabbi strolled by, walked up the same steps, rang the same bell, and then went right in. This time it's Patrick who points out the obvious: "Michael me boy, will you look at that. When a man like that, goes into a place like that, the world is going to the dogs." They went back to work, but before too long they looked up to see the local Catholic priest walk up to the same door, ring the same doorbell,

and go right in. With understandable sadness in their eyes, Michael and Patrick looked at each other and simultaneously said, “Well, will you look at that ... the poor girl must be dying.”

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I went to a Catholic grade school ... because that’s where Catholic kids from my hometown went to school. The thought of a Catholic kid going to the public school, or a Protestant kid going to the Catholic School just never occurred to anyone.

In case you’re wondering, that’s all we had in my hometown: Catholics and Protestants. Life was simple. I knew exactly what I believed ... and if I ever forgot, I could always look it up in my Baltimore Catechism. I was taught to memorize beliefs, and to do good works.

Things stayed that simple through college and during the first 6 months of my career in a Big-8 accounting firm. But then I sensed a calling to live my life as a member of the Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuits. Notice that I said I *sensed* a calling, rather than *heard* a calling. I’ve always been suspicious of people who claim to communicate back and forth with their God; but again, that probably just says more about myself than I ought to admit.

For me, there isn’t anything mystical or mysterious about a calling. It kind of boils down to sizing up a situation and then asking yourself, “If not me, who? And if not now, when?” But despite this “call,” my time with the Jesuits was not a comfortable period of my life and eventually seemed not to be a good fit.

The vow of poverty once included corporal sacrifices like wearing a scratchy undershirt as a reminder that the purpose of life is not creature comfort. For me, that would have been easy compared to articulating my beliefs—not what I had been *taught* to believe, but what I *actually* believed. Sooner or later I found myself pondering imponderables, such as the meaning of life, eternity ... that sort of thing. That invariably lead to mind-bending questions like the one just about every smarty-pants Catholic-school third grader asks—questions like, “Can God make a rock so heavy that even He can’t lift it?”

Confronted with such a question—or its grown-up equivalent—my Jesuit superiors would just say, “God works in mysterious ways,” which didn’t strike me as much of an answer.

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Compared to life in the Jesuits, law school was a breeze. It made sense. So did my law practice, especially the daily excursions into the intricacies of the Internal Revenue Code. Clients raised interesting questions and I was reasonably good at coming up with clever answers. Questions that have answers, and numbers that add up: I’ve always liked that sort of thing.

Don’t get me wrong. Life wasn’t perfect. For example, I recall an invitation to speak at the Connecticut bar association’s annual tax conference. They probably wanted me to unlock the mysteries of some fascinating subsection of the tax law, though for some reason I can’t exactly recall which subsection it might have been. Anyway, I had flown in the night before, wearing

jeans and a pair of white running shoes. The flight had been on time and so I was able to get a good night's sleep. All was right with the world. But as I was getting dressed that next morning, I realized that I had mistakenly packed two left dress shoes.

I decided to wear the white running shoes, but when I put them on, it looked silly. Paired with my dark suit, the white running shoes looked twice their normal size and seemed almost to glow. So I decided to wear the two dress shoes instead. After all, who would notice that both were left shoes?

It felt kind of funny as I slipped them on, but they didn't look too bad in the mirror. Surely no one would notice that I was wearing two left shoes. Satisfied with my choice, I headed downstairs. But then I noticed something. Have you ever tried to walk while wearing two left shoes? This may sound strange, but I found it difficult not just to walk straight, but to think about anything but the two left shoes.

I had no choice but to go back to the white running shoes.

That's a true story. It really happened ... exactly that way. It came back to me last night as I was trying to think of a way to explain to you this morning how it is that I could end up actually *choosing* Catholicism. For me, it's a comfortable fit, at least when compared to anything else that I've tried on. If I were smarter or wiser, maybe I'd find and choose something else ... but I doubt it.

If shoes are a metaphor for one's belief system, I'd venture to say that at any given moment, each of us has a favorite pair ... two shoes that we keep going back to, even if they might not always be in style or appreciated by others. I also would guess that each person's favorite pair tends to be remarkably similar to a pair currently or once worn by someone you've held in high regard. Maybe a parent ... maybe someone else.

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I've got a few sobering things to say about lawyers and lawyering, but first I want to put several additional thoughts on the table. In theory, all of these will come together at some point.

Princess Bernice Pauahi Bishop was by all accounts a remarkably kind and gentle soul, genuinely humble despite her extraordinary talents and wealth. But what captured my imagination when I first read about her and her will was the expression "good and industrious men and women." As you know, the Princess provided for the creation of Kamehameha Schools so that boys and girls could become good and industrious men and women.

My wife Susie and I pray regularly that our children turn out that way. Three of them are now adults ... technically, anyway. And I'm proud to say that they seem to be good and industrious people. The last of the four, Tom, is a 7th grader who seems to be coming along nicely. Just the other day, sensing that Susie was feeling sad about the older kids going to school on the mainland, Tom stopped what he was doing, gave his mother a big hug and told her how much he loved her. Later, I took him aside and told him that I was proud of him; that he had

done the right thing, in the right way, at the right time. I told him it reminded me of his older sister and brothers. He just smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and in a matter-of-fact way said, “Monkey see, monkey do.”

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It was my great privilege to spend a lot of time with Herb Cornuelle during the last few years of his life, especially the final few weeks. Because he seemed to be so wise, I would pepper him with questions like, “Why were we put on this planet?” “What does it mean to believe in God?”

Herb always took my questions seriously and would do his share of the talking, but he never seemed to actually answer any of these questions, at least not directly. What he did say always reflected an extreme degree of humility and more or less boiled down to this: “All we know for sure is that you and I are not God, so *we* must be content simply to ask good questions.”

When I told him that questions aren’t as satisfying or comforting to me as are answers, he said, in his own way, that God works in mysterious ways.

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Most of us in this room are lawyers. For the most part, we have worked hard to get where we are, and we try our best to use our skills both to help people and to earn a good living. In short, we strive to be good and industrious men and women. But with all of life’s distractions, we sometimes don’t think much about the special responsibilities that we might have, not just to clients and the public, but to our own community of lawyers.

Discontent among lawyers is pervasive and seems to be increasing. According to the ABA, most lawyers say they would choose another career if they had the decision to make over—and three out of four say they would not want their own children to become lawyers.

This discontent can be seen in more than just survey results. Health statistics paint a grim picture. It’s been estimated that one-third of American lawyers suffer from depression, alcohol abuse, or drug addiction. This is three to four times the estimate for other Americans. Last year three of our fellow lawyers in Hawaii took their own lives. Another lawyer recently told me he feels as if the ceiling is slowly coming down. I’ll leave for another day my own thoughts on why so many lawyers seem to feel this way and what might be done about it.

Today, I simply call on all of us in this room to take advantage of every opportunity to extend professional respect and moral support to our fellow lawyers. Also, for those who seem to be struggling mentally, emotionally, physically or professionally, let’s stand ready to refer them to existing bar association programs that are there to provide appropriate help. Appreciate the lawyers who staff and volunteer in these programs and consider lending them a hand. As you spot unmet needs (and there are many), ask yourself, “if not me, who?” and “if not now, when?”

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Each of us expresses faith in his or her own way. For some, it might simply be a matter of saying, “I believe in God.” But for someone like me, who needs to define a term before using it, and who doesn’t know how he would even *begin* to define God—and whose head hurts when he tries just to think about it—well, that’s probably why I’ve previously declined all opportunities to talk publicly about my beliefs.

Now that Scott has given me this opportunity to share my beliefs, I guess they boil down to trying to be a good and industrious person. And perhaps for no better reason than that it’s what I saw my parents do, I believe this requires me to be active in civic matters.

The last thing my mother said to me before she died was that she was proud of me. The last thing I said to her was that I was proud of her. Success for me will be to live my life in such a way that my kids will be proud of me.

I’m not sure why I believe all of this, but I do. It just feels right.

It’s true that some of the callings I’ve responded to turned out to be wrong numbers, but even they had value. For example, I treasure my brief stint with the Jesuits, and I now realize that this speaking opportunity was not just easier than I thought it would be, but kind of fun.

I guess it’s true. God *does* work in mysterious ways.