

Mother's Thoughts for the Day: Ten Character Lessons

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By M.C. Sungaila | May 08, 2019 at 12:30 PM



M.C. Sungaila (left) and Jane Sungaila (Courtesy photo)

After I graduated law school and throughout my career, my mother has sent me near-daily notes with inspiring quotes and words of encouragement. Many of these handwritten notes were written on stationery she created expressly for these notes: "Mother's Thought for the Day" was emblazoned across the top. In later years, after the advent of cellular phones, she sent these notes by text message rather than on paper.

The focus of these "thoughts for the day" was on courage and character, essential elements to both succeeding in a career and in life. The overarching message was that being a person of character is important. Each individual message has highlighted a different aspect of strong character. Here are 10 of them:

1. **Courage.** It takes courage to take your first deposition or argue for the first time in court. Courage, too, is required to continue to build your skill set, to develop business development skills, and put yourself "out there" over and over again to gain new clients. My mother had two pieces of advice for this: one, in her own words; the other, from Robert Kennedy. Mother: "Don't be scared. Scared will not allow you to move forward." And Kennedy: "If our times are difficult and perplexing, so are they challenging and filled with opportunity."
2. **Excellence.** Striving for excellence is important. Clients hire us to handle significant disputes and events in their personal and professional lives. They expect us to perform at a high level. And we, for our own sakes, out of a desire to aspire to the good and become the best that we can be, should never settle for "good enough." This is not easy to do. It requires discipline. It is hard work. But it is essential. After all, as my mother quoted John Ruskin: "quality is not accidental; it results from intelligent effort."
3. **Perseverance.** There are challenges at every point in your career which might make you want to change course, stop trying or simply give up. Don't. Overcoming challenges makes you stronger and helps you grow. Sometimes the first two or three approaches to a potential client don't work. Sometimes you don't make partner at your first firm, or you do not get opportunities to grow or shine at your current job. Sometimes a necessary skill like

public speaking does not come easy to you. Persist. Regroup and find another way to grow and succeed. To pick yourself up off the floor after a defeat and get back into the fight, it is helpful to have goals and a vision. As my mother reminded me: "Obstacles are what you see when you take your eyes off the target."

4. *Compassion.* Being a lawyer is hard. Have some compassion for yourself, as you would a good friend. And have compassion for others, too. After all, "a friend is someone who when you've made a fool of yourself doesn't think you did a permanent job."

5. *Authenticity.* Always be yourself. Don't try to be someone else. People respond well to authentic, sincere people. As a new lawyer, you may see a senior lawyer engage in a certain style of oral argument; do not imitate them, instead study why what they do works and consider adapting the techniques that fit with your personality. Don't measure yourself against others. The only true competition is with yourself. "Never try to be better than someone else; be the best you can be."

6. *Gratitude/Presence.* Sometimes it can be hard to be "present" or in the moment with so many cases and responsibilities swirling around. Pause. Breathe. Focus on the task in front of you. And if you are still overwhelmed by the events of the prior day, treat each day as a new day, an opportunity for new possibilities. Or, as my mother texts me every morning: "Make this the best day ever!"

7. *Integrity.* Sometimes it can seem easier to cut corners, take the easy way out or choose not to do the right thing. It might be easier in the short run, but in the long run it impacts who you become. When your thoughts, words and deeds align, you maintain your integrity. Even in the most difficult times, as my mother observed, "we cannot lose our faith in doing the right thing." One good person standing up for what is right and just can make a difference.

8. *Humility.* Don't be too full of yourself. We are lawyers, not gods. We may have special knowledge and training, but we are not infallible. Sometimes our first analysis of a problem is wrong. Sometimes we have to regroup and look at the problem another way. Maybe a member of your team disagrees with you and recommends a different approach. Hear them out. After all, "not everyone agrees with you—they could be right."

9. *Joy.* We work hard, but we should not forget to smell the roses. Inject some humor into the day. Remind yourself what you most enjoy about the law. Have fun outside of work, with friends, family, pets. Travel. Play the drums, compete in CrossFit, go for a hike. As my mother says: "You ought to have a little fun in life; otherwise, every day is like going to the dentist."

10. *Service.* We serve our clients and our community. It is important for us to give back, individually and as a profession. Feed the homeless with St. Thomas More Society once a month. Serve on a community or nonprofit board. Take on a pro bono case—public interest organizations like Public Counsel and Veterans Legal Institute circulate lists of clients in need each month, and bar associations like the ABA and the Orange County Bar Association have online resource lists of other public interest organizations that could benefit from assistance. As my mother reminded me: "none goes his way alone. All that we send into the lives of others comes back into our own."

M.C. Sungaila is an appellate partner at Haynes and Boone in Orange County, California, where her parents also live. Her book, "Mother's Thoughts for the Day: 25 Years of Wisdom," was published in April.