Ugly as SIN

Arnold B. Kanter*
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Abstract

As I said, not so long ago women were a rather scarce commodity in our firm.
As I said, not so long ago women were a rather scarce commodity in our firm. As they became less scarce, we had to try to figure out what the hell we were going to do with them. To give you some idea of how our firm struggled with the "woman problem" (as we used to call it), I've salvaged the minutes of a 1979 meeting of a subcommittee of our Executive Committee.

"What are we going to call ourselves?" asked Oscar Winters.

"I'm going to call myself Bob," answered Robert Mentor.

"No, I mean this subcommittee. We're supposed to deal with the woman problem, but I don't like the ring of 'Woman Problem Subcommittee.'"

"We could call it the 'Subcommittee on Sexual Equality,'" suggested Stephen Falderall.

"Sounds very 1960ish. Sheldon Horvitz would love it," commented Mentor.

"I'm not sure I like it," said Nails Nuttree. "What does 'equality' mean, anyway? We may be opening a whole can of worms.

"Well, I certainly don't want to do that. I'm extremely anti-worm," announced Oscar.

"Why do we have to name the subcommittee anything?" asked Mentor.

"I'm pretty sure the firm handbook requires it. Anyway, it's traditional, and I don't think we should just thumb our noses at tradition because of some women," said Oscar.

"Okay, then why don't we call it something innocuous, like the 'Subcommittee on Sex in the Law Firm,'" suggested Stephen.

"No, nothing with 'sex' in it. And your suggestion doesn't form an acronym, anyway," complained Oscar.

"Fine, then how about 'Subcommittee on Institutional Non-discrimination,' SIN," suggested Stephen, which suggestion was adopted unanimously by the subcommittee.

"Exactly what do we consider to be the 'woman problem'?" asked Stephen.

"Well, we are getting more and more women lawyers around the firm," said Oscar.
"Yes?"
"And they're, well, different," continued Oscar.
"I've noticed that myself," commented Nails.
"I mean, how can we send them out to clients? What would our clients think?" asked Oscar.
"Confidentially, I see that as something of a problem myself," said Robert. "I mean clients are guys. And guys talk about different things than girls."
"Such as what?" asked Stephen.
"Such as sports, for instance."
"What makes you think women can't talk about sports?" asked Robert. "My wife knows more about the Bears than I do. And Stanley's secretary, Bertha, can tell you the lifetime batting average of Harry Chitti."
"Who the hell is Harry Chitti?"
"See what I mean. Harry Chitti was one of a long string of inept Cub catchers. A walk when old Harry was catching was as good as a triple for the opposition. The runner would go on the first pitch, Harry would play the ball off of the wall behind the plate and then he'd toss it into center field."
"Well, even if some girls can talk about sports, there are other things guys talk about that would not be appropriate for girls."
"For example?"
"Girls."
"Well, maybe guys would just have to not talk about 'girls,' as you call them, in front of women," said Stephen.
"It's not just talking about girls," explained Oscar. "Clients just aren't used to seeing girl lawyers. They wouldn't want anything important to be handled by them."
"Then we'll just have to show them that the women we've hired are every bit as good as the male lawyers we have," said Stephen. "But there are some very practical problems," said Nails. "In my experience, women tend to have babies."
"You are a man-of-the-world," said Stephen. "And when they do, they tend to disappear, right in the middle of a trial. Men don't do that, in my experience."
"Well, maybe we could hire around that problem," suggested Oscar.
"What do you mean?" asked Bob. "Well, first of all, we could stay away from the married ones."
"It's against the law to ask if they're married," said Stephen. "I'm too clever to fall into that trap. You don't have to ask, just look for the ring."
"Yes?"
"And they’re, well, different," continued Oscar.  
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"No, if we have to invite somebody, how about that Jane Hokum-Cohen? I hear she was a damn good field hockey player. And she's vavavaVOOM, if you know what I mean," said Nails. "Nails, Jane's married and so are you," reminded Oscar. "Yes, but I'm not blind."

[STANLEY'S NOTE: Jane's guest appearance at the next SIN meeting was a turning point in the history of women at our firm. Not only did she refuse to excuse herself to go to the ladies room (she said she didn't have to go), but she insisted on reporting on the meeting to all associates. Shortly thereafter, the original SIN was dissolved.]

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**THE BLISS OF CHILDHOOD**

When I was a child and life was sweet, innocent, and full of fun, there were no lawyers. Sure, there was a lawyer's office down the street and one of my friends, Freddy, even had a lawyer for a father. But lawyers weren't in my life, not the way that kind and helpful grown-ups like wise doctors, kind police officers, funny barbers, and friendly bricklayers were. You see, a kid can look, listen, and understand what these normal grown-ups do. But a lawyer?—nah!

And certainly, in my early childhood none of us actually wanted to grow up to be a lawyer. After all, from what I could see, Freddy's father didn't really do anything—unlike doctors, police officers, barbers, and bricklayers—and what child dreams of growing up to do nothing? Yes, life was very good then and very much without lawyers.

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**THE UNCERTAINTY OF ADOLESCENCE**

But five to ten years later, life got much more confusing: hormones kicked in; *Highlights* magazine was out, *Newsweek*, *Time*, and the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue were in; and late-night television was suddenly accessible. It was then that my friends and I first began to read and hear about lawyers. The early indications were not promising—lawyers were always part of "bad" stories like murders and Congress.

And sometimes—now that we were older and our parents weren't so careful with their conversations—that word "lawyer" would be overheard. Mom and Dad said it with a special dreadful tone, just like they said "surgery," "IRS," and "Aunt Clara's visiting for two weeks."

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