

**RETHINKING SUCCESS:
JUSTICE FRED LEWIS' REMARKS AT THE 25TH
ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE
ST. THOMAS LAW REVIEW**

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Longtime Florida Supreme Court Justice Fred Lewis, a straight shooting, folksy man who has earned enormous respect for his contributions both on and off the bench, spoke in the spring of 2013 at the *St. Thomas Law Review's* 25th Anniversary Celebration. I assumed he would talk about legal issues or the professional responsibility of attorneys, throw in some war stories, and give a pep talk about the practice of law. "Do good as you seek to do well" and "keep your chin up" are the normal fare in a speech to eager law students poised to step into the rough and tumble world of practice.

While his talk included pinches of each of those, his theme was very different and deeply personal. If you would have heard a recording of his remarks, but did not know who he was speaking to, you would have had no way of guessing where he was.

As he walked among the tables of law students, faculty, and alumni, microphone in hand, Justice Lewis advised us to reformulate the central purpose in our personal and professional lives: instead of pouring all our efforts into constructing the perfect life, which even this youthful audience may have understood to be a futile enterprise, he advised that we focus on living the life we have *in a perfect manner*.

His point, which did not particularly resonate with me at the time, kept bubbling up in the days and weeks that followed. Although St. Thomas University School of Law is a Catholic university and the theme has a spiritual feel, it was secular. Lewis never suggested we accept our particular lot as what is *supposed* to be or that living "perfectly" is grounded in a particular set of religious principles.

His message was simpler. Many attorneys just do not like what they do, or, if they do, they do not like the conditions they do it in. That fact, coupled with the knowledge that they are unlikely or unable to change things much, takes an immense psychological toll on them and those

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around them. It can transform an otherwise pleasant and decent human being into a creature who, if they were to view their own behavior through a Rawlsian veil of ignorance, would condemn it.

Justice Lewis' point was not that we should abandon our efforts to improve our lives at home and at work, but instead – knowing they are not perfect and never will be – to reframe our purpose much like a struggling sports team reformulates its game plan at halftime. By leaving the definition of perfection up to each of us, we become motivated to do better in a far more effective way than if we are simply preached to or warned not to run afoul of codes of ethical conduct.

To understand this, imagine that, with Rawls' veil still draped over your head, you are reading a novel in which the protagonist had led your exact life up to the present day. Now imagine you are assigned the task of writing the rest of the book so that the main character handles a host of serious challenges with aplomb in a way that inspires your readers. If the protagonist's life happens to work out perfectly by the end of the book, the reader would, of course, be pleased; but, if they are *inspired* by the character, they would obtain a higher pleasure.

The point here – and the reason Justice Lewis' advice is so wise – is that we are both the author and the reader in our own lives. As Odysseus found, the journey will not be trouble-free and the ending may not be perfect, but we *are* able to experience the reader's pleasure in an inspiring tale as long as we focus on writing it that way.

So His Honor's advice to live the life we have perfectly is a formula for success, a means of enhancing our enjoyment of life, with no pious sermons or sleight of hand. And the fact that an uptick in our own satisfaction may transform us into better human beings is a bonus, which, as we know from experience, is rarely achieved by simply imploring us to do better.