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BY DAVID H. SPRATT
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Take Time to Wander Outside Your Comfort Zone

Last summer, my 11-year-old son and I went on several new adventures. We laughed our way through three Pennsylvania amusement parks, attended a horse race in West Virginia, and enjoyed the beauty and ambiance of several Virginia wineries (For the record, he ate cheese and salsa, and I did the wine tasting!). The most novel, exciting, and challenging part of our summer excursions, however, was the day we went white-water rafting and conquered the beginner level of an aerial adventure park in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. On paper, we might sound like two outdoorsy, thrill-seeking enthusiasts, but nothing could be further from the truth. We took time to wander outside our comfort zones. In the process, we experienced personal growth, shared some wonderful memories, and realized we had certain skill sets we never knew we had. So, enough about my summer vacation, let me tell you how all of this reminiscing can make you a better lawyer.

As lawyers, we develop personal habits and certain legally beneficial character traits. The majority of these habits and traits, we hope, serve us quite well. For example, most lawyers have a fastidious attention to detail, an obsessive-compulsive relationship with meeting deadlines, and a cynical, jaded view

of the world as, after all, every banana peel or drop of water on the floor is a tort just waiting to happen.

But most lawyers also have habits and traits that might be stifling or detrimental. We become set in our ways and sometimes fail to recognize that we can and should wander outside our comfort zones. I hear some of my most hardened readers thinking to themselves, "if it ain't broke, don't fix it," and, to some extent, I agree. But even if something does not need to be fixed, almost everything and everyone, including old dogs, can benefit from a tune-up. Thus, I offer some suggestions on how to wander outside your comfort zone with minimal risk and in hopes of a sizable payoff:

I. INVEST IN A LEGAL WRITING HANDBOOK

As lawyers, we are wordsmiths. Clients rely on our ability to write and speak well. The language we use and the impressions we convey to others are the two most powerful tools in our lawyering arsenals. But, just as a good chef always needs to sharpen her knives to use them precisely and adeptly, a good lawyer always needs to sharpen her language and grammar to use them precisely and adeptly. Long-standing grammar

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rules sometimes go by the wayside (Google “death of the semicolon,” for example), including many of the ones we learned as children and now preciously cling to (such as to never end a sentence or clause with a preposition). Having a current Legal Writing Handbook to use as a resource is crucial and forces you to abandon outdated rules and dispose of archaic habits. These are two of my personal favorites: Deborah Bouchoux, *Aspen Handbook for Legal Writers: A Practical Reference*; and Richard Wydick, *Plain English for Lawyers*.

2. RE-EVALUATE FORMS AND BOILERPLATE

Throughout the tenure of this column, I have written repeatedly about the dangers of relying on boilerplate. A lawyer should treat each case differently and recognize that clients do not pay us to engage in cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all legal representation. I understand that forms and boilerplate language can be effective if used correctly: when you rely on words that you have created and used to great success in the past. Using your “own work” prevents you from including language simply because “it was already there” and makes you think through each word and punctuation mark. Even with your own words, however, you need to make sure the language is still as sharp as Ina Garten’s knives. Do not rest on your laurels. It is a rare document that cannot be improved, so go outside your comfort zone and improve it. Each time you use form language or boilerplate, carefully consider each word to make sure it needs to be there. Imagine your 11th-grade English teacher (or your resident columnist) peering over your shoulder and asking you to defend every word. Ask yourself three questions as you re-evaluate your language: 1) Is there a clearer way to say this?; 2) Is there a more concise

way to say this?; and 3) Is there a more active or powerful verb I can use to convey my idea?

3. DISCOVER NEW SITUATIONS THAT FORCE YOU TO STRETCH YOUR MIND

I am not saying that you should throw caution to the wind and dabble in a new legal specialty; doing so without adequate knowledge and skill could result in all kinds of ethical dilemmas or worse. But there are other opportunities to stretch the mind of a lawyer who is set in his ways. Volunteer to teach a CLE. Conveying ideas to others makes you learn them much better and see the issues through the lens of the audience, all of which make you a better lawyer. Or consider mentoring a law student from your alma mater. Law schools love having seasoned attorneys act as mentors. Sharing the wealth of knowledge you have with a crop of newbies introduces you to current social trends, expectations, and tendencies, all of which, for better or worse, keep you current, on your toes, and, once you reach a certain age, force you outside your comfort zone.

For this summer, my son and I are discussing several more amusement park trips — nothing too out of the ordinary. But we have also been talking about tackling the “advanced beginner” level at the aerial adventure park or Class III rapids on a less-forgiving river. Each summer, I will strive to go outside my comfort zone, sharpening my skills and broadening my horizons with a new shared challenge. ■

Questions, comments, or suggestions, even those that force me outside my comfort zone, are welcomed at dspratt@wcl.american.edu.