

The “L” Word (and it isn’t “Law”)

I always find it amusing when lawyers disdain something because it is “touchy-feely.” I guess because we are supposed to be gladiators, we cannot indulge our human side. Renowned researcher, Paul Ekman, in his book *Emotions Revealed*, as well as in his many other studies, describes the utter human-ness of emotions. Anger has a revered place in the pantheon of emotions for lawyers, since it is probably the *only* one that we feel safe expressing. The other fundamental emotions which span all cultures, such as sadness, surprise and fear, are so threatening to us - as to expose our basic (human) vulnerabilities - that we disdain and label them (“touchy-feely”).

Last month, at a truly uplifting symposium *Humanizing Legal Education* hosted by the ever-gracious Michael Schwartz and Washburn Law School in Topeka, Larry Krieger kicked off the first day’s proceedings. After my instant initial reaction, “The guy must run or something. I’m going on a diet tomorrow!” I settled down to hear what he has recently captured in his research on the lives of law students. In speaking of law, and its teaching, as a calling which captures us - inspires us - Larry returned to two words he jokingly whispered every time they escaped from his mouth. These are words which aren’t chiseled in the tablets in bas relief over the doors of law schools alongside *Justice* and *Equality*. Yet they can be (have been) a subject of many columns in *The Complete Lawyer*. These words are “love” and “spirituality.” Of course, to segregate these forces from our work and study aborts the natural intertwining of who we are as people with who we are as lawyers. At the same time, to construct a work environment which views family commitment - and family joy - as a competitor, is to fray the strands of what binds us to our humanity while we engage in this extraordinary work we are so blessed to do.

It’s impossible to really talk about “family” without talking about love and I want to spend the rest of this brief essay talking about a beautiful movie I saw this weekend which captures both. If “art” is a creative way of saying something familiar, than *Lars and the Real Girl* is quintessentially art.

Lars is a painfully shy 27 year old man who lives in the garage “mother-in-law apartment” behind his brother and sister-in-law’s home. Both of them try to entice Lars into their home for breakfast, dinner or any sort of warm human interaction, but he spooks at the notion of this kind of intimacy. All live in a small north mid-western town where, of course, everyone knows everyone. Lars is constantly asked why he isn’t with a nice girl and he blanches and shuffles wordlessly away - usually off to his cubicle at the nondescript local business where he works.

One day, after a co-worker shows him the wonders of anatomically perfect life-size human dolls from a website, a crate arrives at Lars’ door and he informs his brother and sister-in-law that he is bringing a girl he met on the internet over for dinner. Thus begins a magical hour in a world of kind, unassuming people, as the entire town adjusts to Lars and his new “girlfriend.” Such a scenario could be mawkish, heavy-handed or simply embarrassing.

Instead, it is a deft treatment of love. The way in which the town embraces Lars' silent "girlfriend," Bianca, for no other reason but that they love this shy, awkward, seemingly lost soul, is just about as sweet an experience as you can get with people who are fictional and you don't know.

That's the point, really - The great, though uncomplicated, things we will do out of simple love. Isn't that what we bring to our families? For those of us who are caught up in achievement and the joy we experience from the brass rings that our children or spouses grab - and amass - *Lars* reminds us of the simple pleasure of love...just because you're there. This is a hard lesson for many of us lawyers to learn, as we have been immersed in a culture that rewards achievement. Go to the best law school, make Order of the Coif, get a job at a major firm, bill high, court the partners, *become* a partner....in a word, *achieve*. We bring it into our personal lives - certainly with the acquisitions we feel we have earned for all our hard work ("What a beautiful house you have!").

Our families need to be our refuge from this ethos. Our families are the place we turn, to love completely. It's not a place where we *get* love - but where we just give our love over and over again. If we're going too fast, giving our love slows us down. If we are stressing from the pressure of a wave of deadlines, giving our love eases the tension. It's not easy. Oftentimes, it is an act of will. In my own life, I am aware that during those time I am engaged, relaxed and enjoying myself, my wife is the first person I want to speak to. Yet, when I'm staring at my computer screen, scrolling through e-mails or staring at another letter from an annoying opposing counsel, my wife, daughter, dog and family are far, far from my mind. This preoccupation can go on for days and if the hours in the office stretch out my connection to my anchor becomes attenuated.

Thus it is with warm pleasure that I find myself sitting at the dinner table on nights like tonight, the Pacific Northwest winter rain soaking the leaves recently piled on our lawn, the three of us just yakking about our day - about nothing at all. The golden retriever curled under the table and I manage to dig my stockinged toes under his belly while I listen to how my girl's hands hurt after her first try at parallel bars. My wife talks about her favorite therapy client - the 60+ year old grandma who loves rock n' roll turned up *loud* and who hungers for tenderness from her husband of more than 30 years. I *could* say that there is something remarkable about our interactions or time together, but there's not. We just sit around and in a very undramatic way, love one another.

That's what grabbed me so about *Lars*. No-one is going to give these people an award for how they care. No red carpet for them. Yet, watch these solid folks cart a life size doll around in a wheelchair to go clothes shopping or have her hair done. They talk to her as if she were alive - because they care so deeply for the young man who harbors the delusion that she is his first great love. We can delude ourselves that love really consists of the great gesture or dramatic act and that may be true when we are courting. However, when we are finally *family*, love is more attending to one another with care. Love is a verb, after all. I'd venture to say that it's a lot more important verb in our lives than "negotiate," "take a deposition," "object" or even "make partner." Well, *Lars* would certainly agree.