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Lessons from My Mentor, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

I had the great fortune to clerk for Justice O'Connor in the 2001-02 Term, and I was struck by how she managed to achieve the utmost professional success while still living life to its fullest. Each day of my clerkship offered lessons that I have tried to integrate and implement in my own life, particularly now that I, too, find myself running a judicial chambers. I offer just a few of these lessons in her honor and with the hope that they might be helpful to those navigating careers in the legal profession.

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Build friendships with colleagues. Justice O'Connor always treated her colleagues respectfully and cordially, even when adamantly disagreeing on the substance of cases. But her efforts to build personal relationships went far beyond civility. She insisted that all the Justices have lunch together after every argument session and every meeting in which they voted on cases. She also planned social events. For example, she organized a concert series in one of the Supreme Court conference rooms for all of the Justices and their clerks. The musicians ranged from famous concert pianists and opera singers to my own brother playing his folk-rock music with his guitar—Justice O'Connor invited him when I mentioned that he was just launching a career as a singer-songwriter.

I have followed Justice O'Connor's lead in working to build friendships with my colleagues, and doing so has made me a better judge. When you like and trust someone, it is easier to keep an open mind when considering their views,

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which leads to more fulsome deliberations in deciding cases. This, in turn, increases the chance of reaching agreement on how a case should be decided, and of respectful explanations of disagreement in concurring or dissenting opinions when agreement is not possible. Working with friends also makes any job more enjoyable, and, especially given the high stakes, stress, and long hours judges often face, adding extra joy to that mix is a gift.

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Look forward, not backward. Observing Justice O'Connor, it was clear that she understood that her full focus and presence was needed for each and every case that came before her. She had reverence for the responsibility and weight of her decisions, and she demanded of herself and of her clerks enormous effort in considering every argument, precedent, equity, and practical consequence. That meant that we did not stop working on a case until she felt she had gotten to the best answer. But part of doing the best possible work was moving on once that happened. Justice O'Connor did not dwell or engage in self-doubt—she worked as hard and as carefully as possible to decide the case before her and then turned her laser focus to the next case. She instructed that each case deserved our full attention, which we could not give if we were still stewing over the last case. Directing all energy forward, not backward, was a rule of mental discipline that Justice O'Connor strictly followed.

I have come to appreciate how this approach facilitates the best work. If you always give your fullest effort—and understand that all you can do is give something your best shot—there is room for deep reflection, but not for regret. If you have the confidence that you gave it your all, it frees up mental and emotional energy not only for the work ahead, but also for everything else in life that requires that energy.

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Make exercise part of your workday. A quirky aspect of clerking for Justice O'Connor was that her female clerks were required to join her for an hour of aerobics at 8:00 AM three times a week. Friends of hers from around D.C., wearing t-shirts with slogans such as “Exercise Defends Your Constitution” made by former O'Connor clerks, would join us at the basketball court on the top floor of the Supreme Court—“the highest court in the land.” After working past midnight regularly, I sometimes lamented the lost hour of sleep. But I came realize that Justice O'Connor was teaching us important lessons: Unless you take care of your health, you cannot sustain intensely hard work. And finding efficient ways to take care of your health during the workday leaves more time for other activities outside of work.

I do not require my own law clerks to do aerobics with me—and they make it abundantly clear that they appreciate that. But I do walk on a treadmill desk while I work, and I have a second treadmill desk for the clerks. Walking at even

a slow pace while I read briefs and edit opinions means that, by the end of the day, I have usually walked eight to twelve miles without even noticing. And that means that, after work, I can spend time with my family instead of going to the gym.

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Stop to smell the azaleas. Justice O'Connor was determined not to let her clerks spend the whole year in D.C. without enjoying what the area had to offer. Even when deadlines were looming, she would announce that we were going on field trips—it was her way of demonstrating that no matter how important and consuming one's work is, other aspects of life are important too. She took us in the Supreme Court's van to the Washington Monument, the FDR Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial, and a Baltimore Orioles baseball game. After September 11, 2001, we visited the National Museum of Asian Art where Tibetan monks were creating a mandala out of sand as an offering for protection and healing. We were *never* to miss the cherry blossoms, so even though the weather was terrible on the day we were scheduled to go to the Tidal Basin, we picnicked in rain and wind under the gorgeous trees. When the azaleas were in full bloom at the National Arboretum, off we went to admire them as well.

In this way, Justice O'Connor modeled the importance of taking time to appreciate history, art, and nature. I try to do the same for my clerks, so over the years we have visited the Computer History Museum near our chambers in Silicon Valley; the Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Gardens during oral argument weeks in Pasadena; and Pike Place Market during oral argument weeks in Seattle. We recently donned protective glasses to watch the solar eclipse (which was only partial at our courthouse), and we never miss walking through San Jose's "Christmas in the Park" holiday display with cups of hot cocoa in hand. In recent years, our final field trip has been to Shoreline Lake, where my teenage daughter has given all the clerks a sailing lesson.

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Prioritize mentoring. Former clerks would visit chambers frequently, often joining our lunches with Justice O'Connor. If more than a year had passed since their last visit, she scolded them for staying away too long. Between visits, she kept up with their lives through letters and phone calls. She would give advice about everything from careers to parenting to choosing a pet. I remember her telling some former clerks that they would be happier if they left their law firms for academic jobs and her telling others the opposite, depending on their personalities and reactions to their current jobs. She advised some new parents to hire full-time nannies so they would have more flexibility than daycare offered. And when I came to work one day saying my husband thought we should get a dog and that he had his eye on a chihuahua, she instructed me to bring him into chambers right away so she could give him a stern warning that chihuahuas are

too noisy and that a poodle would be a better choice. Whenever one of her former clerks had a baby, she sent a tiny t-shirt that read "O'CONNOR GRANDCLERK."

I benefited hugely from Justice O'Connor's investment in her clerks' careers: She attended my Senate hearing to support my nomination to the Ninth Circuit, and then, even though her health was declining, flew to San Francisco to administer my oath of office. I now try to extend this support to my own clerks. I always make myself available to my former law clerks for advice, job references, and visits. Keeping up with their lives and celebrating their career successes is another source of tremendous joy.

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Justice O'Connor made enormous contributions to the law and to the advancement of women in all professions. She did all of that while building friendships, supporting her clerks, and exercising every day. She is a model for a life well lived, and I am grateful for everything she taught me — my career, and my life, are better for it.