

December 2023

Volume 29, Number 3

GEORGIA BAR

JOURNAL

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The following article appeared in the Summer 2023 issue of the American Bar Association's *Litigation Journal* and is reprinted with permission.

BY DANIEL W. VAN HORN



On a recent visit to Atlanta, I attended a talk focused on the State Bar of Georgia's Lawyer's Creed. I was certainly not aware of the creed until that night, but hearing it for the first time left a profound impression on me. The states in which I am admitted have no similar creed. Georgia's Lawyer's Creed is as follows:

To my clients, I offer faithfulness, competence, diligence and good judgment. I will strive to represent you as I would want to be represented and to be worthy of your trust.

To the opposing parties and their counsel, I offer fairness, integrity and civility. I will seek reconciliation and, if we fail, I will strive to make our dispute a dignified one.

To the courts, and other tribunals, and to those who assist with them, I offer respect, candor and courtesy. I will strive to do honor to the search for justice.

To my colleagues in the practice of law, I offer concern for your welfare. I will strive to make our association a professional friendship.

Aspirational statements like the creed matter. We often fall short of the high standards found in such statements. But our greatness is not measured in how often we measure up to those standards. Our greatness is measured in having high standards at all and in our earnest desire to get back up and try again when we fail. In that way, documents like the creed are critical to who we are as a profession.

To the profession, I offer assistance. I will strive to keep our business a profession and our profession a calling in the spirit of public service.

To the public and our systems of justice, I offer service. I will strive to improve the law and our legal system available to all, and to seek the common good through the representation of my clients.

The creed is just 186 words. Yet, in such a limited use of words, Georgia has managed to capture everything that we as attorneys are called to be and to do.

Promising our clients that we will use good judgment is by itself profound. How does one develop the judgment necessary to appropriately represent our clients? To do so requires truly understanding our clients and their needs. It also requires understanding when what our clients say they want is not good for them. The ability to say no to our clients might be the best use of good judgment.

We certainly owe a duty to represent our clients, but do we seek to make the dispute a dignified one? Do we seek reconciliation or do we seek first to fight? The creed calls on us to think about and care for opposing parties. How often do we do that?

Do we think of other lawyers as our colleagues to whom we owe a concern for their welfare, or do we see them as competitors or, worse yet, the “enemy?” Do we even think about lawyers who are not on the other side of cases from us? If we get so busy that we fail to notice other lawyers in need, have we done our duty to care for other lawyers as colleagues? When we fail to care for fellow lawyers, especially those suffering from depression, mental illness and substance abuse, we fail the clients they serve even though they are not our clients. We know that lawyers suffering depression, mental illness or substance abuse commit malpractice at a higher rate. Part of upholding our profession is caring for fellow lawyers.

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Even though I am not a Georgia attorney, I plan to adopt the creed as my own, and I encourage you to do the same. Wouldn't it be great if every jurisdiction

adopted the creed or something very close to it and then regularly asked attorneys to reaffirm their duties under it? Just as couples renew their marriage vows, perhaps on Law Day each year, attorneys all across our country should follow Georgia's lead and affirm of reaffirm their commitment to the principles of the creed. '

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