

2/1/2019

Yesterday's Wisdom is Fresh Today

Bill McCurry



Bill McCurry

Understanding our past helps us make better decisions for our future. This requires an understanding of how things have changed over time, while also understanding how things have stayed the same. This month, when we honor our past presidents, Washington and Lincoln, let's also take the time to consider the wise thoughts of another of our celebrated forebears. These ideas were valid when first written; they serve as guideposts for today and beyond.

Justice Billings Learned Hand, who was born in 1872, is among many of America's unsung heroes—and too often overlooked. He'll always be one of my favorites because of this 1934 ruling:

Anyone may so arrange his affairs that his taxes shall be as low as possible; he is not bound to choose that pattern which best pays the treasury. There is

not even a patriotic duty to increase one's taxes.

A justice on the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in lower Manhattan, Learned Hand was continually passed over for the Supreme Court due, no doubt, to his blunt and outspoken opinions. His habit of turning his seat 180 degrees on lawyers whose arguments annoyed him didn't help. He could also be bitingly sarcastic. In one memo, he wrote:

This is the most miserable of cases, but we must dispose of it as though it had been presented by actual lawyers.

Consider these thoughts from Justice Hand. Each one resonates in business today. Each one gives us a new way to look at old problems. For instance, are you resisting a new idea that would trigger change?

A wise man once said, 'Convention is like the shell to the chick, a protection till he is strong enough to break it through.'

Are you disagreeing with a team member without a fair and open discussion of the issues?

The spirit of liberty is the spirit which is not too sure that it is right; the spirit of liberty is the spirit which seeks to understand the minds of other men and women.

Too often we put off making a decision for fear of being wrong. Is this stifling your progress?

Life is made up of a series of judgments on insufficient data, and if we waited to run down all our doubts, it would flow

past us.

When disputes arise, do you sometimes find yourself in situations where you favor one team member over another?

If we are to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice.

Do you ever feel like the only one who can make a decision, instead of remembering there's the option of sharing your concerns with others?

The mutual confidence on which all else depends can be maintained only by an open mind and a brave reliance upon free discussion.

Do you remember the importance of considering what others need when "laying down the law"?

The condition of our survival in any but the meagerest existence is our willingness to accommodate ourselves to the conflicting interests of others, to learn to live in a social world.

How often do you compromise rather than insist on a yes-or-no answer?

We believe, and I think properly, that when the men who met in 1787 to make our Constitution, they made the best political document ever made; but, remember, they did so very largely because they were great compromisers.

Our country has had countless wise leaders. We sometimes forget the truths they've handed down to us—truths that have stood the test of time. Consider how these perspectives can help you today. Many of our challenges aren't novel, but simply old conundrums in contemporary trappings. **GP**

Bill would love to hear from you with questions, comments or ideas for future columns. Please contact him at wmccurry@mccurryassoc.com or (609) 688-1169.