A Rap on Justice

“ What is your definition of justice?”

This question, discussed and debated from time immemorial, was asked by an audience member at the December taping of Tavis Smiley’s “Courting Justice” PBS series here in Cleveland, which CMBA Executive Director Becky McMahon and I attended. The question was posed to the panelists, Ohio Supreme Court Chief Justice Maureen O’Connor, Judge Ronald B. Adrine (Cleveland Municipal Court), Judge Patrick Carroll (Lakewood Municipal Court), and Yvette McGee Brown (Former Justice of the Ohio Supreme Court), who gave insightful and thought-provoking responses. See http://www.pbs.org/wnet/tavissmiley/interviews/courting-justice-cleveland-pt-2/.

Because thoughts had been thus provoked, audience members with whom I spoke after the taping continued the conversation, defining justice in their own terms. Judges, lawyers, and non-lawyers alike offered unalike observations from their unique experiences and vantage points. What an exhilarating exchange of views, I thought, as I exited the doors of the Idea Center at Playhouse Square into Cleveland’s exhilarating winter air — although “exhilarating” was admittedly not the word on my (frozen) lips by the end of my walk back to Key Tower, fighting 90-mph winds and enduring negative-150-degree wind chills.

During my inaugural address, I mentioned that justice is in our DNA as an organization. One of the CMBA’s “Core Values” is to “protect access to justice and equal justice, and promote a fair, efficient and competent system of justice for all.” We carry out this Core Value every day, in myriad ways. At a programmatic level, the CMBA has led and partnered with others on “Justice For All” initiatives to help bring legal services to underserved populations. And as a pillar of our Strategic Plan, we are reinforcing and expanding “thought leadership” efforts by helping to convene stakeholders and coordinate activities on issues of law and justice.

As a legal community, justice is ultimately what we are all about. Each in our own ways — both big and small, traditional and novel, obvious and subtle — we are bolstering and building upon society’s cornerstone, advancing the cardinal civic virtue. As Alexander Hamilton said, “I think the first duty of society is justice.” Together, we define how we treat each other and how we let others be treated, which, in turn, defines us as a society, and as citizens. Conceptually, justice is the perfect treatment of others, an ever-elusive goal because it is sought by imperfect people in an imperfect world. But we are vigilant in pursuing it nonetheless; wings without thrust fall from the sky.

Defining justice is likewise ever-elusive. Justice is an intuition borne from the history of human experience, and is baked into our bones. Words can thus never adequately describe it. But the more we think about it, the more we talk about it, and the more inputs we gather from the wealth of that human experience, the more we spiral toward it.

So I thought I would wrap up this mini-discourse on justice with a rap on justice, to put a few thoughts out there on the street in a format that looks a little less like a snooze button than the first half of this article. I might even perform it on the CMBA’s website.

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I hear the music swollin’ as I’m floatin’ down the aisle

Excited and nervous all the while, and the trip feels like a mile

I smile behind my veil, but I can’t see past it well

To the future, to the trials and the glories and stories life will tell

Then we unite, for better or for worse

We’ll alight upon a pile or a plight — a blessing or a curse

But for now, it’s just us — a body and soul about to start

A marriage of cosmic circumstance, till death do us part

Amp it up, break it down, make it right, make it count — no justice be denied

Amp it up, break it down, make it right, make it count — cuz yo here comes the bride

The Fates chose you to be the groom, but what if we assume

They decided to sing another tune, pick another womb

Boom! Would I be pursuin’ Happiness, or is the deck stacked?

Are the rules of the game the same for every Jane and Jack?

They’re not. It’s the luck of the draw, there oughta be a law

But wait, there is — a million and one in all

But it’s never enough — the goal is a ghost

At most, there’s blurry edges, but it disappears when approached

Can’t give up the ghost or, well, all hell breaks loose

Gotta be like LeBron down three to one — refuse to lose

Seven billion twenty-five thousand six hundred souls

All fighting for the right to light up the world

I can be Happy with no mansion and no yacht

I can live with my choices if I throw away my shot

Blam! But I can’t stand talkin’ to the hand of the Man

When by unjust command I am banned from the Promised Land

Amp it up, break it down, make it right, make it count — no justice be denied

Amp it up, break it down, make it right, make it count — cuz yo here comes the bride
Hon. William K. Thomas

PROFESSIONALISM

AWARD

NOMINATIONS NEEDED!

The CMBA requests nominations for the Hon. William K. Thomas Professionalism Award to honor a lawyer or judge who has significantly contributed to the enhancement of professionalism in the Greater Cleveland legal community by exemplifying the goals of the Ohio Supreme Court’s A Lawyer’s Creed and A Lawyer’s Aspirational Ideals and by furthering the ideals expressed in the Mission of the CMBA. The award will be presented at the CMBA’s Annual Meeting in June.

SUBMIT NOMINATIONS BY FRIDAY, APRIL 14, 2017 TO:
Ethics and Professionalism Committee
Attn: Kimberly M. Baga, Chair
1375 East 9th Street, Floor 2
Cleveland, Ohio 44114
or e-mail to Heather Zirke at hzirke@clemetrobar.org

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Rick Manoloff is President of the CMBA, a public finance partner at Squire Patton Boggs (US) LLP and a fan of the Cavs, Hamilton and Eminem. He does not write raps for a living, or as a pastime, although he has stayed at a Holiday Inn Express numerous times. He can be reached at (216) 479-8331 or rick.manoloff@squirepb.com. All copyright interests in the poem/rap are reserved to Rick Manoloff, who plans to retire early on the royalties.

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Adding Structure to Restructuring Strategies for Surviving Uncertain Times

Thursday & Friday, May 4 & 5
CMBA Conference Center