The Bar Council

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I was told I could choose my own topic for this speech. Which is always a slightly dangerous thing to ask a criminal barrister. You could have ended up with a 15-minute journey through disclosure, hearsay, or telephone evidence. I might have enjoyed that enormously. You, perhaps less so.

I considered talking about "my work", but the more I thought about the cases I've done over the last 30 years, the more I realised that the thing I remember most isn't the law, the legal arguments, or even the trials themselves.

It's the people. The people who we help and the people who need our assistance, fairness and empathy when they collide with the legal system. This is something that FRU does so beautifully. FRU helps people when they are in need and when they may not have the capacity to speak for themselves or the funding to navigate what can often feel like a labyrinthine system.

When I wanted to become a barrister, I thought the profession would be about advocacy. I had read To Kill a Mockingbird and thought how heroic Atticus Finch had been. I had watched LA Law and imagined it was terribly glamorous. The reality is rather different.

It is occasionally heroic. Sometimes getting to court on time and in one piece feels heroic enough for one day. It is rarely glamorous. One of my less glamorous moments involved standing in an outbuilding on the Isle of Sheppey surrounded by rotting dog and cat food (a cover load for hundreds of kilos of drugs) and asking a police officer, "Where is the glamour?" That afternoon, neither of us found it.

But what I did not appreciate when I started was that our work gives a front-row seat to humanity.

You spend your career meeting people at some of the most important moments of their lives. People who are frightened, grieving, angry, vulnerable, courageous. And if you spend enough years doing that, you learn things. Not legal things. Human things.

Perhaps the first thing I learned is what an extraordinary privilege it is to be allowed into people's lives at moments when life becomes very real.

One of the greatest privileges of the work we do is proximity. We see people not as they present themselves to the world, but as they are when life becomes real.

I learned that lesson in a most unexpected way and very early in my career.

I was a pupil barrister, representing a young man in the magistrates' court. I was in conference with him, his mother and his younger sister, congratulating myself on taking what I thought were excellent instructions as a third six pupil and cosplaying knowing exactly what I was doing. Then his sister, aged about sixteen, unexpectedly went into labour.

Within 20 minutes, assisted by her remarkably calm mother, I found myself helping deliver a baby. There was no Bar School training module for this. Or if there was, I had missed that particular seminar. Nothing in pupillage had prepared me. No chapter in Archbold covered it.

What I remember most is how quickly everyone stopped being professionals and simply became human beings. Security staff, court staff, paramedics, family members. Nobody cared about legal arguments anymore. A baby was arriving. Everything else became irrelevant.

Thirty years later, I still wonder about that child and where life took her.

That day taught me a lesson that has never left me. However seriously we take ourselves and our work, life has an extraordinary way of reminding us of what really matters. It is the people we meet along the way.

And once you really start looking at the people rather than the case papers, you discover something else: they are almost never quite what you expect.

A lesson the Bar has taught me is how dangerous it is to make assumptions about people. We all do it. We read headlines, we hear allegations and form opinions.

Many years ago, I represented a woman accused in a highly publicised case involving allegations of witchcraft abuse of a child. The media attention was immediate. Public opinion formed long before a jury had heard any evidence. Her child was removed from her care. Her reputation disappeared. She became a headline.

But headlines are not evidence. As the trial progressed, it became clear she had done nothing wrong. The allegations against her were withdrawn, and she was acquitted.

What stayed with me wasn't the verdict. It was watching someone live under the weight of public judgment before any court had reached its own conclusions. The experience reinforced something I have seen repeatedly throughout my career: People are almost always more complicated than the labels attached to them. Human beings rarely fit neatly into categories. Life is seldom as simple as a headline.

Sometimes, if you look beyond the headline, you see qualities in people you might never have expected. One of those is courage.

When I was younger, I thought courage looked dramatic. I imagined epic speeches and heroic moments. Instead, what I've seen is that courage is usually quiet.

One of the most remarkable investigations I worked on involved an undercover operation in North London known as Operation Peyzac. The police set up what appeared to be a music shop. Over many months, criminals brought firearms and drugs into what they believed was a safe environment. The operation ultimately dismantled a gun factory and led to numerous prosecutions.

What stayed with me wasn't the criminality. It was an undercover officer known as "Fish". For over a year he interacted daily with dangerous criminals. On one occasion a man who had supplied him with a firearm demanded it back. The situation could easily have become catastrophically violent. Yet he used quiet diplomacy to diffuse it and the next day he went back and did it again. And the day after that. Not because he was fearless but because he believed the work mattered.

That's what courage looks like. Not the absence of fear, but the ability to continue despite it. I've seen that same courage in witnesses, victims, jurors, police officers and, occasionally, advocates both junior and senior desperately hoping no one notices how nervous they are. I've learned that, at our heart, we really are far more courageous than we originally think. Courage is also catching; it can inspire others to take the step that scares them and which often shows us we are far stronger than we think.

But there is another side to courage. Sometimes it isn't about walking back into danger. Sometimes it is simply admitting that you're struggling. That is a lesson I had to learn for myself.

About ten years into practice, I experienced significant anxiety. From the outside everything looked fine. Inside, things felt very different. I worried constantly. I doubted myself. I became convinced I was somehow the only person in the profession experiencing those feelings. Which is one of the many lies anxiety tells.

Eventually I sought help. What surprised me was what happened when I started talking about it. Other people started talking too. Barristers. Judges. Police officers. Highly successful people. Again and again, I heard the same response: "I know exactly what you mean."

It was one of the most important lessons of my career. You never know what someone else is carrying. Every person you meet may be fighting a battle you cannot see.

It is the reason why I consider wellbeing amongst our profession and those who work in the justice system to be paramount, non-negotiable and of critical importance.

I have seen firsthand that speaking up and speaking out is empowering. It allows others to know its OK not to always be OK and that its more than OK, necessary even, to ask for help when you need advice or are struggling. I hope that experience made me a better advocate. I certainly think it made me a more compassionate one

And compassion matters in our profession because the people we meet don't encounter the justice system at some convenient, carefully chosen moment in their lives. Very often, they meet us when their world has fallen apart.

One of the reasons I wanted to become a barrister was the belief that you can use your voice on behalf of others. Nowhere have I felt that responsibility more strongly than in homicide cases.

One case involved an elderly woman who was isolated, abused and ultimately killed by her own son. As I prepared for trial, I kept returning to one thought. The last thing we could do for her was to give back the voice she had been denied during her lifetime. To make sure she was remembered not simply for how she died, but for who she was.

When the defendant in that case was convicted, there were tears. Not in court, but afterwards. Because all of us felt that, at least in some small way, her story had finally been heard.

Homicide cases have taught me something else about people too. The extraordinary courage of the families left behind.

They come into the criminal justice system at perhaps the worst moment of their lives. They are grieving, often bewildered, and suddenly having to deal with police

officers, lawyers and court hearings they never imagined would become part of their lives.

I remember a man whose mother was killed after fireworks were deliberately put through the door of her home. What stayed with me was his compassion. Despite everything he had lost, he showed remarkable empathy towards the young defendants and went on to use his experience to campaign for better controls on the sale of fireworks.

Sometimes courage is retaining your compassion when you have every reason to lose it. Bereaved families have taught me that our job is not simply to be an advocate in a case. It is to listen. To explain. To treat people with kindness and dignity. For us it may be a case. For the people we represent, for the families and the witnesses, it is their life.

That, to me, is one of the most important functions of justice and what we do when we represent people.

There is also a rather less dramatic sort of courage that most advocates will recognise: the moment when you're absolutely terrified, everyone is looking at you, and you realise that you're the one who has to stand up.

This final lesson came during a six-month trial involving what was then the largest heroin importation ever intercepted in the UK. I was junior counsel. Halfway through the trial my leader became seriously unwell and had to withdraw. Suddenly I found myself with seven defendants, multiple defence silks and months of evidence resting on my shoulders. There was, in short, absolutely no pressure at all!

People kept asking whether I was nervous. The answer was yes. Extremely. In fact, I think my nerves were probably visible from space. It was one of those situations where people say, "You'll be absolutely fine." Which is comforting right up until you realise none of them are volunteering to swap places with you.

In short, there was no plan B. I was plan B.

There seems to be a belief that advocates eventually become fearless. My experience is that we don't. We simply become better at functioning while channelling our nerves into excellent preparation for the people we represent.

In that case what got me through was not confidence. It was the team around me. The officers, analysts and investigators who had dedicated years of their lives to that case.

That trial taught me something important. What we often describe as individual achievement is rarely individual at all. Success is almost always collective.

We are better together than we are alone.

I think that is what all these stories have in common.

None of the most important lessons I've learned over thirty years came from a textbook. They came from people.

When I joined the Bar, I thought the stories I would remember would be the cases. I was wrong. What I remember are the people.

The baby unexpectedly born at Court.

The woman nearly defined by an allegation that proved false.
The undercover officer who quietly risked his safety every day.
The victims whose voices deserved to be heard.
The families who somehow found compassion in the middle of grief.
The colleagues whose support made difficult things possible.
And the many people who taught me lessons they never realised they were teaching.

My work has brought me face to face with some of the worst aspects of human behaviour. But what endures, for me, is something else entirely. It is humour in adversity, compassion in the face of loss, courage in difficult circumstances, and most of all fairness, dignity and humanity.

If I have learned anything over thirty years at the Bar, it is that nobody succeeds alone, nobody knows everything, and anybody who claims they do is usually worth cross-examining. I have learned that the best lessons usually come from other people.

That whatever challenges we face, whatever decisions we make, we should try to remember the thing that sits at the heart of all that we do; people.

The work FRU does for people, for those who need our humanity the most in difficult times, cannot be underestimated. It is vital and it showcases everything that good advocacy is; people focused, human centric and compassionate. An opportunity to ensure those scales of justice we all see as our leitmotif in the professions remain resolutely balanced for those in society that need us the most.

For your tireless work on behalf of the people you represent and the public who need us, I thank you.