

# THE CORIOLANUS SYNDROME

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*Coriolanus was*

*Shakespeare's last tragedy.*

*T.S. Eliot regarded this play as the Bard's  
finest artistic achievement, a complex and stirring  
reflection of its author's mature, consummate skill.*

*Yet Coriolanus is today among his least  
popular works, perhaps because*

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# IS IT VIRTUOUS TO BE OBSTINATE?



Shakespearean audiences and scholars regard its hero, Caius Marcius, as the least lovable of tragic heroes. Unlike Hamlet, Lear, MacBeth, or Othello, Marcius doesn't seem troubled or even reflective about his choices, nor does he learn from his mistakes. Like some expensive, hot-shot professional athlete, he is gifted, swaggering, and narrowly self-centered. As a warrior he is superb; as a friend or a trusted leader, he is pathetic—a dazzling quarterback with the personality of a gorilla.

Seeing the Folger Theatre's fine fall 1991 production of *Coriolanus* in Washington, D.C., made me wonder whether this play is unpopular in part because it reminds the American public all too much of its feelings these days about lawyers and other would-be public servants.

The play is set in 5th century B.C. Rome. Its opening scenes reflect an environment of class struggle and tribal warfare. In subtle anticipation of what will emerge as the hero's flaw, the common plebeians are restive with fear that the patricians of the Senate will neglect them in an approaching famine. The wise and elderly Menenius, a gentle patrician who has earned the trust of the commoners and who is, coincidentally, Caius Marcius' best friend, teaches the citizenry about the interdependence of the parts in the body politic: the Senate may be the body's stomach, "the storehouse and shop of the whole body," but in time that stomach sends nourishment through all "the rivers of the body." That the plebeians are the body's "big toe" counsels toward patience, not toward rebellion.

Suddenly word of an attack by the Volscies, a neighboring tribe, interrupts this discussion of domestic affairs. The noisy confusion of war fills the stage, until the Romans return victorious, chanting the name of their new hero, Marcius, and carrying him seated atop their shoulders, his arms drenched with blood. They change his name to "Coriolanus," in honor of his heroic role in the critical battle at Corioles, where he suffered 27 wounds defending Rome. Finally, as he says, "all alone." In their gratitude, the people propose to honor Coriolanus by appointing him as counsel, a high political position associated with the Senate.

**S**HAKESPEARE'S early descriptions of Coriolanus reveal that he was taught from childhood by his mother, Volumnia, a nearly overpowering figure, that military valor is the greatest virtue; but he is otherwise uneducated. As one considers the almost irresistible comparison between Coriolanus and lawyers, it is natural to wonder whether we instill in law students and apprentice lawyers the perspective Volumnia instilled in her son: if he were her husband, she says, she would prefer his presence on the battlefield to his company in bed. For her, it is more beautiful to see his forehead gashed with blood than to see it nursing at her breast. She applauds upon hearing that her grandson,

Coriolanus' child, caught a butterfly and ripped it apart with his teeth in thoughtless aggression against a symbol of natural beauty.

Against this background, the picture of the thrilled but battle-weary Marcius returning triumphantly home from the front astride the shoulders of his people recalls a scene from *Patton*: the general intently scans the battlefield through smoke-filled air that is heavy with the stench of gunpowder and death, and he says fatefully, "\_\_\_! I love it!"

But Marcius/Coriolanus is disdainful at the prospect of being honored by a political appointment: "I will go wash, and when my face is fair, you shall perceive whether I blush or no." And, "I had rather be their servant in my way than sway with them in theirs." As he returns to his family, he and his mother are so caught up in talk of his military exploits that someone needs to point out to him that he has not yet acknowledged his meek and waiting wife, Virgilia, who stands nearby.

The Senate confirms Coriolanus' appointment as counsel, but the commoners must still voice public approval. He has no interest in the traditional ritual, in which he is supposed to disrobe in public to let the people examine his wounds as an expression of their gratitude. Coriolanus says he would rather suffer all his wounds again than submit to such humiliation. A plebeian observes that he "loves not the common people," having earlier referred to them as "scabs" and "curs." As he thinks of the motley masses pressing him so closely, he says, "Bid them wash their faces, and keep their teeth clean." He is also disgusted at the common soldiers who left him to fight alone in the critical battle. Observes another citizen, "If he would incline to the people, there was never a worthier man."

Coriolanus' mother and friends urge him to be a good sport—even to flatter the people in his public response. But, says his friend Menenius, "He would not flatter Neptune for his trident, or Jove for his power to thunder." And in a line that could describe some lawyers, Menenius continues, "His heart's his mouth; what his breast forges, that his tongue must vent." Under maternal pressure from Volumnia he resentfully acquiesces, even though doing so compromises his sense of the battlefield valor that is his true identity: "Away, my disposition, and possess me some harlot's spirit! My throat of war be turn'd . . . into a pipe small as a eunuch, or the virgin voice that babies lull asleep!"

When he faces the public, some citizen leaders press him with questions that probe his attitudes. He flashes his temper and attacks the questioners, thereby confirming some public fears that he would use his proposed authority in tyranny. As a mob spirit sweeps the crowd, they demand his banishment from Rome. His friends beg him to reconcile, but he replies bitterly, "I would not buy their mercy at the price of one fair word. . . . You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate. . . . whose loves I prize as the dead carcasses of unburied men that do corrupt my air—I banish *you*!"



**B**ANISHED from Rome, Coriolanus goes to his arch enemy, Aufidius, leader of the Volsces, and offers to join him in a new assault on the Romans. When this news reaches Rome, the people are terrified. Now the crowd sings a different tune: "Faith, we hear fearful news. For mine own part, when I said banish him, I said 'twas pity." And others add, "Though we willingly consented to his banishment, it was against our will." They dispatch Menenius to dissuade Coriolanus. When this is unsuccessful, they send his mother, his wife, and his son.

Meanwhile, in lines that probe the suitability of any warrior for peacetime rule, the Volsc leader Aufidius muses aloud over the possible reasons why Coriolanus' people would banish their own hero. Was it pride, he wonders? A defect of judgment? Or perhaps it was his "nature, not to be other than one thing, not moving from the casque to the cushion [from the battlefield to a soft seat in the Senate], but commanding peace even with the same austerity and garb as he controll'd the war."

When Volumnia, Virgilia, and his son approach Coriolanus in enemy territory, he loudly rejects his bonds to them: "But out, affection, all bond and privilege of nature, break!" In language some lawyers could love, he continues: "*Let it be virtuous to be obstinate*. What is that curtsy worth? or those doves' eyes, which can make gods forsworn? I melt, and am not of stronger earth than others. I'll never be such a gosling to obey instinct, but stand as if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin."

His mother argues powerfully that unless he returns, he will be responsible for shedding the blood of wife and child, and history will remember him only as a traitor. She urges him, rather, to be remembered for reconciling the tribal enemies. Finally, she reminds him that his transfer of political loyalties has not instantly created for him a new mother, a new wife, and a new child.

Her persuasion is effective. After taking her hand to declare her happy victory for Rome, he turns to the Volsc leaders, naively expecting them to be delighted: "Though I cannot make true war, I'll frame convenient peace."

Coriolanus' family returns happily to Rome, but the Volsc lords gather around him ominously. Aufidius declares him a traitor, charging that, blubbering before his mother, he broke his oath of loyalty to the Volsces "like a twist of rotten silk."

A recent research project found that the common responses of clients to the word "lawyer" included: "authoritative, insensitive, arrogant, know-it-all, and intimidating."

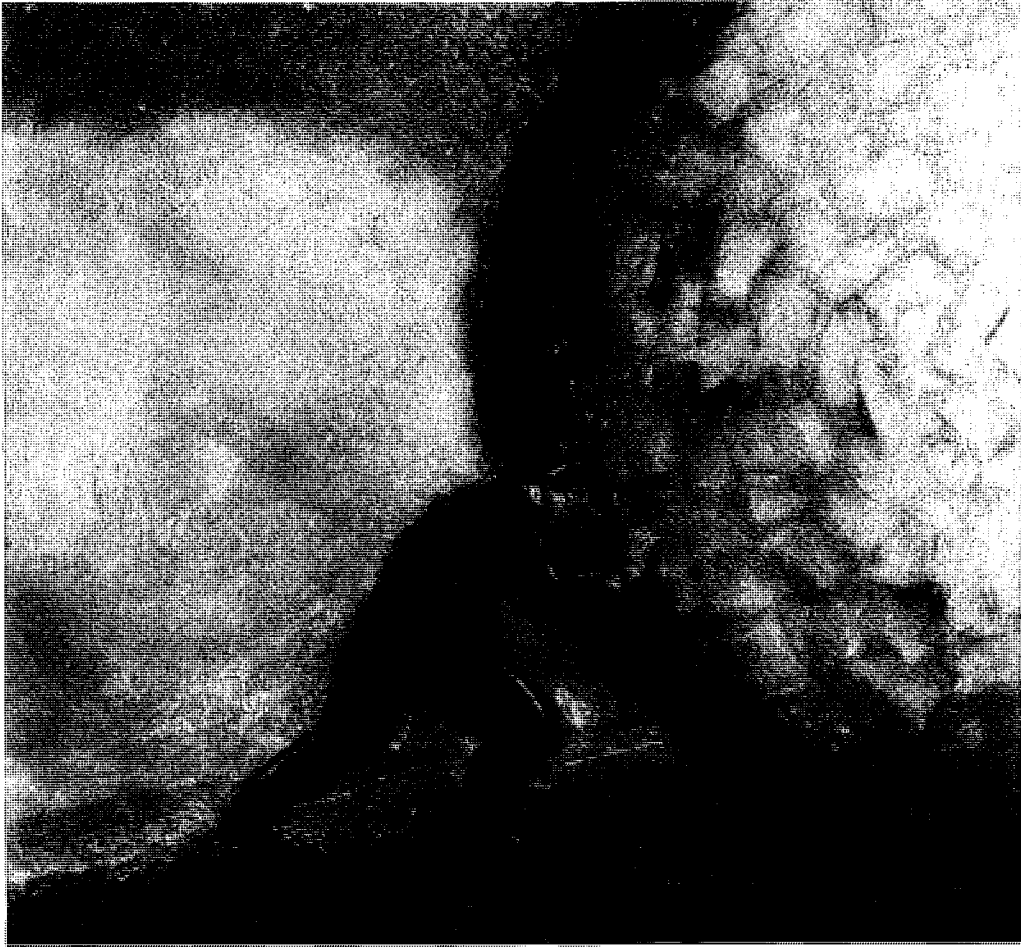
Aufidius insults the former hero, calling him, "Thou boy of tears!" Enraged, Coriolanus brags loudly about the Volscians he slew at Corioles all by himself: "Alone I did it; Boy!"

The Volsc leaders cry out that in that very battle, he killed their sons and fathers. They fall upon him in a rage of swords, Coriolanus falls dead, and the play ends.

**D**URING the same week in which I saw this play, I read a national report on the concerns of clients who have "grown resentful and even antagonistic toward their lawyers." A recent research project found that the common responses of clients to the word "lawyer" included: "authoritative, insensitive, arrogant, know-it-all, and intimidating." The clients complained that lawyers won't "admit their mistakes" and that they "measure their effectiveness by the documents they produce rather than by whether they have helped solve a problem" (*Wall St J*, September 17, 1991, p. B1). Such claims, though obviously not applying to all attorneys, sound like an echo of how the plebeians viewed Coriolanus: he "loves not the common people."

Note in these client frustrations the perception that their lawyers have an excessive love of battle and process, just like Patton: multiplying documents, piling up hours, going to court—loving the process but missing the point. Clients engage lawyers not for their love of battle, but to solve a problem.

A lawyer I know received a call from an outraged woman who had just been served with a complaint by her ex-husband charging in a tort claim that she had damaged him by intentionally inflicted emotional distress. She explained what she had done: the couple's 16-year-old son died in an auto accident. Both parents came, grieving, to the funeral. Because she had primary custody, she had directed that the boy's tombstone carry her maiden name as his last name, even though his legal surname was that of his father. She claimed indignantly that the father had shown no real interest in the boy, despite his occasional visits, and that she had reasons for wanting to "send him a message." She asked the lawyer how they might defend against the ex-husband's claim. He asked in reply whether she wanted to fight or to solve a problem. As she considered her response, the lawyer suggested quietly, "Why don't you just put



up another tombstone showing the boy's legal name?" A lawyer who loved the battle more than the people might have suggested otherwise

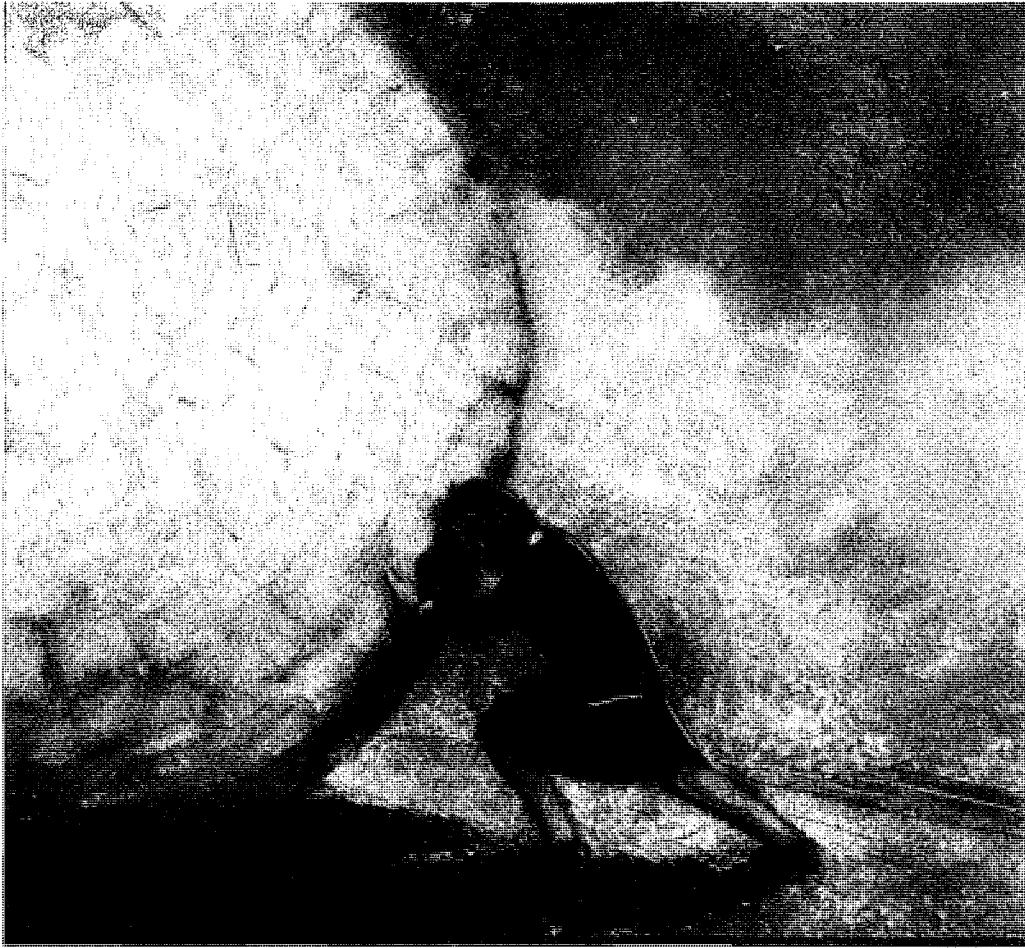
Consider three thoughts from *Coriolanus* for those who practice law: confusing valor with virtue, understanding gratitude and rejection, and inclining to the people

For Coriolanus, "valor is the chiefest virtue and/Most dignifies the haver." Shakespeare scholar Frank Kermode describes this confusion between valor and virtue as creating a pinched conception of duty that "takes no account of social obligations, being based on a narrower concept of military courage and honor . . . The spirit of anger, licensed in war, prevents him from dealing sensibly with the [common people]," rendering him "tragically inept" and "unfit for rule in a complex society." His inability to distinguish the battle field from the public square makes him excessively

intolerant of others' weaknesses—he hates their bad breath, their unwashed teeth, and their fear of battle

Because he equates valor with virtue, Coriolanus also believes that the quiet sounds of gentleness, accommodation, and peace will choke off his mighty voice. Dealing tolerantly with common people would thus squeeze his "throat of war" into a "pipe small as a eunuch." The macho man, he wants no part of a "virgin voice that babies lull asleep." As if to say, real heroes never speak tenderly. Yet even his enemy recognizes his pathetic inability to move from the casque of war to the cushion of peacetime leadership, noting that it must be his "nature, not to be other than one thing." As if to say, no specialized success can compensate for weaknesses in character.

That memorable line, "let it be virtuous to be obstinate," spoken even as his family approaches him, also reflects the



warrior's placement of valor above real virtue. And in the family of legal professionals, a growing number seem to share this form of Coriolanus' myopia. In several recent surveys, many lawyers and judges lament with genuine sadness that "a profession once characterized by mutual respect and lasting relationships has become marked by increasingly abrasive confrontations and rudeness." Litigation was never a race for the short-winded, and clients deserve aggressive representation; but the public is now paying too dearly for deliberate delays, obstruction, vicious personal attacks, and "mindless responses to legitimate requests" from one lawyer to another. (See *Wall St J*, June 24, 1991, p. B1)

At the same time, lawyers, like military warriors, must give up any dreams of being universally "well-liked"—almost as a prerequisite to entering the profession. I won't forget how the sweet victory of winning my first trial was

tarnished by the opposing client, who was so angry at the outcome that he fiercely called me a name I had never heard spoken in professional company. It didn't matter, because it couldn't matter; that is the lawyer's lot. Yet, lawyers are often needed to heal deep wounds and to bring adversaries together, whether as attorneys or as public officials in informal or formal settings. The reputation for public virtue required to satisfy this crucial civic need is not to be taken lightly.

After I had been president at Ricks College for about a year, President Spencer W. Kimball invited me into his office for a brief visit after a regular meeting of the Church Board of Education. He was like Menenius of *Coriolanus*—a gentle, wise, and seasoned man who knew firsthand about the concept of public trust. His first question, spoken with that voice of searching kindness, was, "Well, Bruce, do the

people up in Idaho love you?" The question not only surprised me, it sobered me to the point of utter speechlessness. Finally I stammered back, "I really don't know, President Kimball. But I do know that they love you." I thought about his question for days afterward. That is not a question lawyers can always answer affirmatively, but for those who must carry public responsibility, it is not a trivial question.

One ironic example of Coriolanus' confusion between valor and virtue is his assumption that his enemy will not only become his ally, but will later let him return to Rome, no questions asked. A leader, like a lawyer, has a hard time being a mercenary for whom the duty of valor may be sold to the highest bidder. Lawyers may be engaged and they may be released, but changing one's real loyalty—the serious representation of a community of interest—is hardly like changing clothes—or uniforms. One of the professional hazards of law practice is the risk that transferring loyalties among multiple causes can make a lawyer discount the meaning and the relative worth of loyalty to causes that deserve to transcend narrow professional duties. When lawyers assume that loyalties may be bought and sold, they may put at risk their own sense of what true loyalty is.

Thus, opinion polls regarding matters of personal value show that lawyers are more likely than the public and other professionals to become cynical about such conventional loyalties as patriotism, marriage, or institutional allegiance. An anecdotal Vietnam war story tells of a dazed and hardened soldier who returned from the war, saw a man with a piece of bread, killed the man, and took the bread. When asked why he did this, the soldier replied, "Because I was hungry." The Coriolanus phenomenon applies this "law of the instrument" with special fear: when one's favorite (or only) tool is a hammer, every problem can look like a nail. The dentist trained to use a high-speed drill must never use his instrument in ways that damage human tissue. A lawyer trained to use the acid of critical inquiry offers the public a skill of great value; but his skill can, if misused, destroy fragile human ties and tissues—including the lawyer's most personal ties.

The family dimension is thus among the saddest losses from Coriolanus' single-issue devotion to valor. He is so preoccupied with battlefield glory that, upon first returning home, he fails even to see his self-effacing wife as she waits away from the action to greet him. And when his family members come to beg his return to Rome, he pitifully reveals his value system's disarray: "What is that curtsy worth? or those doves' eyes, which can make gods forsworn? I'll never be such a gosling

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to obey instinct." Well, what is that curtsy worth? What is it worth to nourish one's most basic human instincts enough that we still feel them—enough to obey them? Shakespeare, the great teacher, knew their worth as clearly as anyone who ever wrote a story. True to his teacher's instinct, he left these grand questions unanswered in his players' speeches, but he answered them in the tragedy of the players' lives.

**C**ORIOLANUS also teaches a perspective on gratitude and rejection. The Roman citizens are at least as fickle as he is: early in the play the crowd moves from hero worship to hostility with only arguable provocation; then, when the threat of a new war badly frightens them after they have banished him, they again change their position without hesitation: "Though we willingly consented to his banishment, yet it was against our will." Their grounds for banishing him thus seem no more deeply based than was their original gratitude. Does this mean Coriolanus was correct in his disdainful assessment of the common people? Not really: a leader must take the popular will seriously, but not too seriously. One must, as Kipling put it, "meet with Triumph and Disaster and treat those two impostors just the same."

Shakespeare here offers us a paradox: public servants must avoid arrogant aloofness from the public, yet they cannot let their sense of success turn entirely on the frequently superficial judgments that can lead to either public appreciation or public rejection. Given the public's inability to understand the intricacies of legal matters, this paradox applies especially to lawyers: They must prove worthy of public trust, but the public may not really understand their work well enough to render informed judgment of its quality.

Lawyers naturally desire recognition of their role. When Congress was investigating Oliver North in its Iran/Contra hearings, a congressional questioner appeared to ignore Brandon Sullivan, North's lawyer. Said a frustrated Sullivan, "Sir, I am not a potted plant—I'm the man's lawyer!" But not all clients, let alone the public or its congressmen, really comprehend exactly what their lawyers do, even when the lawyers render significant service. One of my first pro bono clients suffered from a mental handicap that made him not only unable to understand my efforts to help him—he actively interfered with those efforts. He never knew how hard I fought to protect his interests.

To paraphrase Hugh Nibley, lawyers may find that the service for which they are most profusely thanked is almost never the most meaningful service they render. Rather, their moments of greatest service-oriented meaning may remain a little secret between themselves and God, which they can thoroughly enjoy regardless of the absence of public acclaim. There can thus be an unavoidable loneliness that accompanies the use of professional expertise in public service. And sometimes those who need sophisticated help the most may seem to deserve it the least. But as Mother Teresa once observed, she does her work not because she is sure it will be judged as successful, but because she knows it is right.

Still, the other side of Shakespeare's paradox teaches any warrior, leader, or lawyer to seek the perspective that comes from retaining a sense of connectedness to other people. When the Roman citizens sought to banish Coriolanus, they worried that he did not sufficiently "incline to the people." This very fear has long fed public skepticism about the learned professions: what motivates these people whose expertise we require—an expertise so crucial that it may give them life-and-death power over us? Are they truly moved by our interests—or mostly by their own?

Coriolanus' preoccupation with self-interest was transparent: when the plebeians banished him, he lashed out at those "curs, whose breath I hate, as dead carcasses that do corrupt *my* air." Note—not "the" air, but "*my*" air. And when his immediate family members come to the enemy city seeking to reclaim his allegiance, his first impulse is to sever his most intimate ties: he would "stand as if a man were author of himself and knew no other kin." And in refuting Aufidius' taunting "Boy!" he invites his own tragic death by proudly remembering how he defeated the Volscies: "Alone I did it!" He was the most self-sufficient of tragic heroes. As Shakespeare critic Reuben Brower puts it, he is "the absolute hero—detached from humanity."

**T**HIS stance of unencumbered autonomy reflects the untethered individualism of our own day. Some consider this spirit our most cherished contemporary right—what Louis Brandeis once called "the right to be let alone." Thus we naively chase the illusion that we can be liberated from the apparent bondage of personal ties and somehow still be assured of the personal support systems found only in long term commitments. Today's society seems sadly unsure whether the bonds of kinship, marriage, or community are valuable ties that bind, or are sheer bondage. Yet those who break loose from the arms and bonds that hold them tend to replace their previous sense of belonging only with a sense of longing, as this age of liberation becomes more and more the age of personal isolation and loneliness. Ours is the age of the waning of belonging.

In such an age, in family courts or otherwise, people increasingly expect the law to protect them from their obligations to others, believing that their right to be let alone is more weighty than another's right to legal support that would nourish continuity and mutual allegiance. Being among society's leading individualists, lawyers especially face the risk of subordinating all other ties and interests to their desire for Coriolanus-like autonomy. But Michael Novak's insight is worth remembering: "My dignity as a human being depends perhaps more on what sort of husband and parent I am than on any professional work I am called to do. My bonds to [my wife and children] hold me back from many sorts of opportunities. And yet these bonds are, I know, my liberation. They force me to be a different sort of human being, in a way in which I want and need to be forced."

**F**INALLY, as I consider a hero's submitting to the humiliation of showing the common people the wounds he suffered in their defense, I think of another group of commoners and another hero whose body had been wounded in their service: "Arise and come forth unto me, that ye may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I have been slain for the sins of the world."

"And the multitude went forth, and thrust their hands into his side, and did feel the prints of the nails in his hands and in his feet; one by one until they had all gone forth, and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety . . . that it was he, of whom it was written by the prophets, that should come" (3 Nephi 11:14–15).

I can't help wondering whether the Christian tradition had any connection with the Roman tradition that invited the people to see Coriolanus' wounds first hand. But, at the least, the Christian tradition illustrates a leader who understood what Coriolanus ignored, a leader who was literally in touch with his people, the common people. All were alike to him, for he "denieth none that come unto him, black and white, bond and free, male and female" (2 Nephi 26:33).

Might there be times in the life of a Latter-day Saint lawyer, within or beyond the professional role, when he or she could in some small way emulate him who is our "advocate with the Father?" (D&C 45:3). Wouldn't this kind of a lawyer love ordinary people, even to the point of bearing some modest portion of "the pains and sicknesses of his people?" (Alma 7:11).

For me, this possibility is the highest aspiration of the J Reuben Clark Law School. It could well be said of such a lawyer as it was said of Coriolanus, "If he would incline to the people, there was never a worthier man." And on the same condition, never a worthier profession.



