

entre nous

What Price Fame?

"A self-made man? Yes, and he worships his creator."

-William Cowper (1731-1800)

My dear wife, Susan, who has suffered through more bar banquets than a person should endure in a lifetime, has always kept me quite grounded by chuckling, "You lawyers love to give each other awards, don't you?" Yes. I admit it. Through some character flaw or other irrepressible insecurity, I've ended up with a few pieces of walnut on the wall. But I've already assured my kids that there is no need to "preserve my legacy." They can build a big bonfire when I'm gone, and at least get something warm out of them. And don't overlook that scrap brass prices are increasing.

Even with an irreverent sense of humor and cynical perspective, I remain amazed at how skillful lawyers are at creating categories of awards. The late **Mike Crowley**, former Austin Bar President, had my favorite quote about the crowd attending an American Bar Association convention. Twisting Churchill's words, Mike dryly reported, "Never have so many sought so much for doing so little." It's true; we create awards for writing, speaking, fashion, outstanding poobah or toady, and let us not forget the innumerable opportunities to join professional societies, many created for self-adoration.

Now, some distinctions are very legitimate: becoming board certified in an area of law is immensely satisfying because of the process. You must meet exhaustive criteria, be approved by the opinion of your peers, and take and pass a rigorous

written test thereafter. It means something. Being elected to various professional offices at least means that enough of your colleagues have voted to indicate some expression of confidence. But, like P.T. Barnum's mantra, no one has yet underestimated the incredible willingness of lawyers to purchase fame when it comes packaged correctly.

Now, of course, the concept isn't new: we've had the usual parade of "Who's Who" lexicons in this country covering everything from "Young Americans" to "College Students" to "Young Chefs." Pay the bill, get in the book. But for slickly introduced self-importance trumped as genuine fame, we've rarely seen anything like... "The Superlawyers." So, "What price fame?" Now we have a convenient price chart.

It was kinda cute when it started. A well-known magazine, looking for a little extra income vamps out a new issue on the best lawyers in Texas. The problem is, um... there is no problem! Folks like me, who (I suppose) simply have name recognition because we're old, started receiving "the good news" almost immediately, and were hounded with offers to produce a story about ourselves. Hmm... how much fame can I afford today? Photos? Not a problem. Well, actually, I'd have to clean up my desk to have one of those photos sitting on the edge of it, arms afolded and cheshire-grinning (and I need a new shiny tie). I must say, isn't anyone a little embarrassed at this store-bought adulation? Sure, a bunch of deserving lawyers have "made" the list, but look what's happening: we're seeing more and more lawyers relying on their "superness" for professional

notoriety. It would be shocking if it weren't so silly.

I recently spoke at the California State Bar Convention in Monterrey, California, about the Texas Board of Legal Specialization, which is clearly the leader in the nation. While I was there, a couple of board members made it clear that California lawyers are eschewing certification in favor of buying a big spread in the California "SuperLawyer" magazine. Hey, the public thinks it's legit, why actually work to take a test? Who has time to certify when you can specify and magnify for a few dollars more?

And now, here we are, receiving engraved pronouncements emanating from old-guard law firms touting one or two partners' accession to the "Superlawyer" list. Folks, this is showbiz. Have we finally lost all sense of dignity? Don't you dare harp about lawyer ads if you're buying into this "Superlawyer" biz.

Truth be known, most days, I don't feel very super. I'm constantly worried what I might mess up today, or overlook, or not quite have time to do my best. I'm way more Gilligan than Thurston Howell III. I'll bet a lot of other super nominees feel the same way. If not, more's the pity.

Here's a couple of problems I see arising: The California experience demonstrates that the public really is fooled by this. I can't imagine the State Bar is going to allow the kind of

puffery to go on. It reeks. If you tout it, you should admit how much you paid for it. "I'm a Superlawyer. And it cost me \$1,240!"

Secondly, we devalue the type of programs which honor true recognition and achievement. We need to be encouraging certification, membership in the State Bar College, and other recognized Academies or Associations which are merit-based. They serve as a better indicator of lawyer competence than a slick magazine, where you purchase your own fame by-the-word or page, and a photo of that new Armani suit.

Well, I suppose this means I won't make next year's list. Darn. I love those plaques. • AL

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