

A Call to Duty

Transitions: The gifts of change
By Gail Kauranen Jones

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“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.”
--Mahatma Gandhi

On what seemed like the only three days of sun this summer, I served as a juror for a trial in Superior Court. The timing of being called to civic duty couldn't have been worse. Not only was I missing being outside in beautiful weather, but I had an out-of-town house guest staying with me for the week, was under a tight deadline for a short-term, summer writing project I landed and had placed my son in a summer camp program for five days so I could get some work done.

Like some of the 50 or so others waiting in the courtroom to see if they would be chosen as a juror on that first day of "duty," I was praying I wouldn't be selected. Instead, I was envisioning spending my days writing, after an early morning beach walk with my friend from Colorado, who I only get a chance to see once a year.

Nearly four hours later, after a morning screening process to weed out any potential jurors with severe hardships or conflict of interest, my name was called to take a seat in the juror's box. In that moment, I let go of all resistance and chose to accept my legal mandate to serve when called, and to be fully present to the experience.

The judge thanked us for being there, claiming that even he has had to serve as a juror, and knows it can be inconvenient. No profession is excused from serving. In their opening statements to the jury, the two opposing lawyers also expressed appreciation for our presence in the courtroom. We were advised not to discuss the case with anyone, except the other jurors when it came time to deliberate and select a verdict. Reading or watching any news related to the trial was also prohibited.

So while specifics of the trial cannot be disclosed, I have some general observations from serving as a juror with 11 others, of varying ages, occupations and race. My first realization: Never judge others by appearance. Some of the jurors showed up in very short shorts and low cut shirts (which I couldn't even imagine wearing to that beach I

wanted to be walking on) and looked so youthful I was unsure they would have the life experience to reach an objective, fair verdict. Yet, in hearing them talk, they had thoughtfully pondered the case and were able to maturely distinguish between emotions and evidence. In contrast, one juror, who was older and groomed respectfully for a court appearance, offered the least amount of intelligent discussion when choosing a verdict. Watching these exchanges validated the judge's earlier comments of the first day, that despite the inconvenience of serving as a juror, the process works. We need diversity.

My second observation is that serving on a jury is a bonding event that connects us to our humanity. Sharing the same experience for three days, albeit with slightly varying perceptions of it, reminded me that we're all on this life journey together--even when our paths differ. I chose to see what I could learn from each person I met, about how they see the world in comparison to me, and what their gifts might be.

Thirdly, serving on a jury is a minor sacrifice compared to those in our armed services who risk their lives to protect our country. Even though I fell behind on my writing project, and had to work on the following gloriously rare sunny weekend to catch up, my spirit of gratitude increased. I am thankful I witnessed empathy and compassion among my fellow jurors. I am grateful I returned to a loving, conflict-free home each evening.

Lastly, I am most relieved, after previous experiences when my life felt on hold while waiting for a legal resolution, that I was not the plaintiff or the defendant. Legal remedies for personal or professional challenges are often long, emotionally exhausting and sometimes financially expensive ordeals that can throw one's life off-balance. I prefer now, especially after witnessing a trial, and the labor involved in preparing a case, to resolve any grudges I have from within first and decide NOT to react. To do so, I get quiet by taking a long walk or meditating, and discerning when to advocate for myself and others I care about and when to stand back from engaging in a conflict.

Peace is sometimes more important to me than winning.

Gail Kauranen Jones is an author, life coach and workshop leader who has been guiding adults in transition for 18 years. A frequent radio guest on Common Ground (a public affairs program of WZLX, Boston, 100.7 FM), she lives in Topsfield with her two children. Her Web site is: [www. SupportMatters.com](http://www.SupportMatters.com). She can be reached at gailjones@supportmatters.com.