

Heroes

I've been thinking a lot about "heroes" lately.

In Greek and Roman mythology—where "hero" took its etymological root—the Sibyl of Cumae was a divine priestess who led the hero Aeneas into Hades to find his dead father. But ultimately the Sibyl is a tragic figure. By angering the gods, the Sibyl was fated to live 1,000 years, helplessly growing smaller, weaker, fainter. She becomes so powerless she's confined in a jar. Asked what she desires, the Sibyl responds, "I want to die."

That's all the unreal stuff of myth. Still, there are *real* forces and powers every bit as capable of rendering us—*any* of us—just as powerless, even to the point of wanting to die. San Antonio attorney Tom Keyser recalls when those forces and powers made him want to die.

"I actually stood on a chair, put a rope around my neck and couldn't take that step. ... I got to that place that I've heard others talk about where I didn't want to live, and I couldn't die," Keyser says of his past alcohol and drug addiction in the powerful video *Courage, Hope, Help—TLAP Is There*, an initiative of Immediate Past State Bar President Allan K. DuBois.

Keyser and others tell their stories of addiction, depression, and helplessness before finding the Texas Lawyers' Assistance Program, which provides confidential help for lawyers, law students, and judges challenged by substance abuse and/or mental health issues. The video recounts how fellow Texas lawyers—just like any of us—summoned the profound courage to rise out of darkness into light.

When Aeneas asks to be led into Hades, the Sibyl warns:

The gates of hell are open night and day;
Smooth the descent, and easy is the way:
But to return, and view the cheerful skies,
In this the task and mighty labor lies.

For Aeneas, it's easy to find yourself in hell, but infinitely harder to ascend out of it. For us, too.

As lawyers, our hard-charging perfectionism can smooth that easy way into the torment of addiction or depression. Attorney Darren Bertin of Gatesville recalls in the TLAP video how he prayed at night "please don't let me wake up" when professional pressures sent him into "a death spiral" of addiction.

Bertin is far from the only Texas lawyer to make that descent.

Lawyers have the highest rate of depression and one of the highest suicide rates of any profession. Twenty-one percent of practicing attorneys are problem drinkers; for lawyers age 30 or younger, the number rises to almost a third.

Fortunately, Bertin didn't have to ascend out of that hell alone. Nor does *any* Texas lawyer. Help's there—unconditional, nonjudgmental, confidential—through TLAP. "They did that because I am a lawyer," Bertin says, then must collect himself. "I don't know where I'd be at without TLAP."

Last year, TLAP answered more than 700 calls and made 158 presentations to over 12,000 fellow State Bar members. Since the program began in 1989, TLAP has assisted more than

11,000 lawyers, judges, and law students concerned for themselves or others.

But by the time many summon the enormous courage to seek help, they lack the resources to pay for it. Thus, we're blessed to have the Sheeran-Crowley Memorial Trust that ensures no attorney needing treatment is turned away. Through DuBois's own courageous witness and leadership, Texas lawyers contributed more than \$500,000 to the trust, ensuring TLAP will be there the instant a lawyer finds the courage to seek it.

Eddie Rickenbacker knew a bit about courage. America's top ace in the Great War, he was a 52-year-old civilian volunteer in World War II when his aircraft ditched in Japanese-controlled waters with three-days' worth of food. A crewmate prayed for death and another attempted suicide, but Rickenbacker fought to keep them all alive. When they were rescued 24 days later, Rickenbacker had lost 54 pounds.

Was he a hero because he *wasn't* afraid? No, Rickenbacker observed: "Courage is doing what you are afraid to do. There can be no courage *unless* you are scared." Thus fear isn't the *antithesis* of courage, but its *antecedent*.

TLAP fights to keep people alive, too. People with the courage to do what they—or *anybody*—would be afraid to do: confront their illness and seek help. Thus, sometimes our bar does more than just enhance lives. Sometimes it saves them.

Few professions provide for their members what TLAP provides us. And so, simply by our choice to form and fund it, TLAP *itself* matters—to *all* of us. Even to the lawyers who never need it. TLAP may be our bar's ultimate "in-this-all-together"—a hopeful scour for the swelling sludge of discourtesy, disharmony, and discontent. The most corporeal affirmation that what happens to *one* of us, matters to *all* of us.

Yes, I've been thinking a lot about "heroes" lately. Who they are, aren't, and why.

My childhood heroes were sports stars and celebrities—people with whom I had *nothing* in common, as distant as Aeneas, living lives utterly unlike my own. I have different heroes now. And more useful. Now they're people with whom I have *everything* in common, living lives just like mine—contending with and frightened by the same challenges I am—only living them with courage the way I want to be living my own.

Perhaps you need the help TLAP can provide for your own ascent out of hell, or know a friend who does. If so, call TLAP at (800) 343-8527.

Or perhaps you'd like to meet some real-life heroes who did what anyone would be afraid to do and thus embody the most authentic kind of courage. If so, go to texasbar.com/tlap and click on a video.

You'll find plenty of heroes there.



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