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Message from the Dean

University of Michigan Law School

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Over the past four years, I have used my messages in *Law Quadrangle Notes* to comment on the attributes of an outstanding attorney. I have noted the great lawyer's commitments to intellectual growth and renewal, integrity, teaching others about the law, and serving as citizen. During the coming year, I will explore a related theme: that of the great lawyer as keeper of our profession's image.

The legal profession has long inspired a broad range of public images. Throughout the ages, great lawyers have stood as champions of the underdog, bulwarks against injustice, diplomats, and civic leaders. We have had countless opportunities to take pride in the lives of lawyers who exemplify the highest aspirations of our craft, lawyers such as Patrick Henry, Abraham Lincoln, Clarence Darrow, Learned Hand, and Thurgood Marshall.

To be sure, there are other images as well. While it may be easy to romanticize the way lawyers have traditionally been viewed, in truth the caricature of an attorney as venal, unscrupulous, and self-centered has been a longstanding feature of popular culture. And to our great chagrin, the practicing bar has all too obligingly provided examples to reinforce that caricature.

In conversations with our graduates today, I often hear concern expressed that the average citizen holds the profession of law in ever-growing disdain. Even more unsettling, I have observed that lawyers themselves increasingly deride, sometimes with justification, the work and behavior of their colleagues.

I have yet to see a compelling analysis of the presumed decline in public attitudes toward lawyers. No doubt any investigation would take into account changing societal attitudes towards authority, especially towards government, with which lawyers have been closely associated since the framing of the Constitution. Other sources include a shift in media portrayals of the lawyer as an authority figure with special public responsibilities, the rapid growth in



Photo by LARINE PHOTOGRAPHIC

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the number of practicing attorneys, increased economic pressure on both lawyers and clients alike, and changes in our understanding of a "successful" life.

Whatever such a study might conclude, I believe that we must consider how individual lawyers, sensitive to the importance of sustaining public appreciation for the law as a noble calling, can contribute to that appreciation. And I believe that, as critical as lawyering skills are to the profession, so too are the links that lawyers offer to their colleagues, their families, their friends, and their communities. A case in point is Michigan-trained lawyer Clarence Darrow.

A recently discovered treasure trove of Darrow's correspondence, currently on loan from his granddaughters to the University's Bentley Library, provides elegant evidence of the ways in which people from Mother Jones to Theodore Dreiser to Helen Keller came to depend on Darrow for comfort, support, and encouragement. In their letters to him, some of the most prominent and influential people of their time acknowledged the ways in which he supported their aspirations. [Ed.: For more on the Darrow papers, see the story on commencement, page 24.]

I have no doubt that our profession's image benefited enormously from the courage and leadership of Clarence Darrow. Yet I also know that it benefited enormously from Darrow's humanity, from the kindnesses that he showed to friends and acquaintances. And, simple as it sounds, this is where I think we must all start to rebuild the image of the legal profession, among ourselves and within our communities.

The crushing demands of modern life, the long hours spent on tasks which are considered necessary for professional success, can make it difficult for a lawyer to find time for others, to make room for small gestures of kindness. At the same time, those very demands make us even more likely to recognize and appreciate the moments when people go out of their way to be a friend. And when lawyers, whose history is filled with a generous sense of community leadership and model citizenship, are willing to do so, they help to rehabilitate an awareness that our profession is filled with people who are imbued with a generous spirit. And that generosity of spirit lies at the core of the image we wish for the public to associate with those who have chosen a life in the law.

Jeffrey S. Lehman