

THE MORNING THE CAR WOULDN'T START

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Yesterday was going to be an ordinary day for me. I had planned to spend the morning on correspondence and returning telephone calls. I would bring a few clients up to date on the status of their cases, provide copies of current medical records to an opposing lawyer, and return some telephone calls. In the afternoon, I had two appointments. One was with an existing client, and the other with a potential new client. This was going to be an unremarkable day.

I finished my breakfast, straightened my tie, and watched the kids leave for school at 7:30 a.m. I closed the snap on my briefcase, put on my coat, locked the door behind me, and walked to the car. I put my coat on my briefcase, turned the key in the driver's side door lock, and put my coat and the briefcase on the passenger's seat next to me. It would take me about twenty minutes to drive to my office, and I would get in at about 8:00 a.m. I turned the key in the ignition, and expected the motor on my trusty old car to jump to life, the way it had every day for years, and years, and years in the past. It didn't roar. It didn't fire. It didn't moan. It didn't turn over. No clicks. Nothing. Dead.

I walked back into the house and called Al at the gas station down the block. He came by with a big shiny yellow tow truck. He asked me to open up the hood, and he took out two big thick wires. He snapped one wire onto the connecting cable for the battery. The other wire he snapped onto a piece of the inside of the car underneath the hood. "Now give her a try", he said. I turned the key, and the motor roared.

"It's about a twenty minute drive to your office, David, he said." "That should be enough time to get your battery charged up. I think that you'll be ok from now on." When I got to the office, things were no different. At the front of my desk were three piles of papers. This one had unanswered correspondence, the next one the beginning of a motion to be completed, the third one, discovery requests for me to send out. At the back of the desk were two bigger piles. Each one of them had files on it that needed to be reviewed and given attention. This had been pretty much the same situation for the last week and a half. I had been moving papers around day after day, but not accomplishing much. I looked out the window at my car. I needed a jump start too.

I walk over to the coffee pot. Instead of one cup of coffee, I pour two. My friend Henry, who has an office upstairs from me in the same building, likes his with cream and sugar. I make it that way. I don't fill the cups quite up to the brim; I leave a little room for splashing. I take the elevator up to the sixth floor, and stop in to see Henry at his office.

Henry I say, "I've had car trouble this morning." I tell him my woes. I keep on talking and explain that I am having trouble getting started on the work that I need to do in the office.

"I've been waiting for this conversation." Henry says. "I have the same problem, too. I know the solution, and we are going to help one another." "We're going to start right now!"

"Do exactly as I say."

I remember using these last words many times with clients. Now I'm on the receiving end.

Here's what he says to me. "Go back to your office. Don't work on any of your cases. Ask your secretary to hold your calls for the rest of the morning."

“Do what I say.”

“Go through your file cabinet and make a list of every case. Take the closed files out, and put them in boxes. You don’t need the extra clutter. Then go through the files on your desk, and the ones stacked on the chair, and on the floor behind you, and put them on your list too. Finally, compare the list you have with your office list of open files. Make sure you haven’t missed anything.”

“Ask your secretary to type the list up, but leave lots of space between each item, at least two inches.”

“Then let’s get together say about two o’clock tomorrow afternoon.”

“What are we going to do?” I ask.

“Don’t worry, it will only hurt a little bit, and you’ll feel much better when it’s over, he says.”

I think about my last visit to the dentist, but I go downstairs and get to work anyway.

The time of reviewing has arrived. I sit down in Henry’s office with my list, and a clip board which he has given me.

“You and I are going to form a pact. We are sworn to secrecy and confidence.”

My mind drifts to my boyhood days in the tree house behind the back porch.

Then Henry begins:

“Tell me the name of the first case on your list”, Henry asks.

“What is the case about?”

“What is the next thing you have to do to move the case along?”

“What’s a reasonable time to get that done in?”

“Now write those things down. Put the deadline in the left margin of your paper.

“Now I’m going to tell you about the first one on my list...”

“But what about our conflicts of interest?” I object.

“It’s a small community,” Henry agrees, “and we’re bound to have a few cases that have conflicts. But don’t worry, we’ll spot those right away, and won’t discuss them.

I could see what Henry had in mind, and I liked it.

Henry and I went back and forth like this all afternoon. The time seemed to fly by. The problems that seemed like mountains became medium sized hills. The one that looked like hills, I stepped over easily. It wasn’t hard. It didn’t hurt. It was fun.

I got up to leave.

“Not so fast,” Henry said. “I’m not quite finished.”

“I’ve had us swear to secrecy for a reason. Neither one of us is perfect. Once in a while each of us is going to have trouble with one of our cases.” One of the purposes of these meetings is to help each other to solve our problems. When you have a problem, you call me. When I have a problem, I’ll call you. If there is trouble, neither one of us will judge the other. Now we are bound to help one another. In this way, we won’t be afraid to get help when we need it. We’ll give each other advice.”

“That way, we’ll do a better job, and have less stress.”

“Now go downstairs and get your calendar. We’re going to schedule another one of these meetings for next month. We are going to do this together at least once a month.”

“We will be better lawyers.”

And we are.