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In a Dark Wood: Dante as a Spiritual Guide for Lawyers

Joseph Allegretti
Sienna College

IN A DARK WOOD: DANTE AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE FOR LAWYERS

JOSEPH G. ALLEGRETTI*

It is almost cliché nowadays to talk about the "crisis" afflicting lawyers and the legal profession. Many lawyers are disillusioned with their work, unhappy with their lifestyle, and doubtful about the wisdom of their career choice.[1] They suffer high levels of psychological distress, substance abuse, and depression.[2] Writer Steven Keeva claims that lawyers are facing a "personal spiritual crisis."[3] What's missing in law practice is "caring, compassion, a sense of something greater than the case at hand, a transcendent purpose that gives meaning to [their] work."[4] Federal court Judge William Hoeveler agrees and calls the problem "a loss of individual spirituality."[5] Dean Anthony Kronman of the Yale Law School makes a similar point in his important book, *The Lost Lawyer: Failing Ideals of the Legal Profession*.[6] Kronman notes that people enter the legal profession for a variety of reasons. Some seek money, power, or prestige. Those are not bad reasons. Most lawyers, however, "also hope their work will be a source of satisfaction in itself. Indeed, many hope the intrinsic significance it affords will be important enough to play a significant role in their fulfillment as human beings." This hope, however, has become harder to nurture and maintain. No longer do lawyers believe that their work can satisfy these deeper yearnings. As Kronman says: "This crisis is, in essence, a crisis of morale. It is the product of growing doubts about the capacity of a lawyer's life to offer fulfillment to the person who takes it up. Disguised by the material well-being of lawyers, it is a spiritual crisis that

* Professor of Business and Professor of Religious Studies, Siena College, Loudonville, New York. B.A., Colgate University; J.D., Harvard Law School; M.Div., Yale Divinity School. Professor Allegretti presented an earlier version of this article as part of the Distinguished Speaker Series at St. Thomas University School of Law, Miami, Florida, on September 23, 2004.

1. JOSEPH G. ALLEGRETTI, THE LAWYER'S CALLING: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LEGAL PRACTICE 3 (Paulist Press 1996).

2. STEVEN KEEVA, TRANSFORMING PRACTICES: FINDING JOY AND SATISFACTION IN THE LEGAL LIFE 4-5 (Contemporary Books 1999).

3. *Id.* at xx.

4. *Id.* at 11.

5. *Id.* at 13.

6. ANTHONY T. KRONMAN, THE LOST LAWYER: FAILING IDEALS OF THE LEGAL PROFESSION 2 (Harvard Univ. Press 1993).

strikes at the heart of their professional pride."[7] Harvard Law Professor Mary Ann Glendon puts it more starkly: "American lawyers, wealthier and more powerful than their counterparts anywhere else in the world, are in the midst of a great sadness."[8]

The legal profession, it seems, has lost its way. This spiritual crisis will not be resolved by a change in the rules of professional responsibility. It will not be resolved by an ABA commission or by a reform of legal education. A spiritual crisis calls for spiritual answers. The first step is for lawyers to begin asking the right questions: Why did I become a lawyer and what keeps me in the profession? How can I regain a sense of meaning and fulfillment in my work? How can I rediscover the path I have lost?

To answer these questions, lawyers might study the experience of others who have lost their way and struggled to regain it; others who have passed through a spiritual crisis only to find new meaning on the other side. Perhaps the most famous of all such spiritual seekers is the Medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri, whose *Divine Comedy* traces his journey of redemption through hell and purgatory to paradise. Despite the 700 years that separate his life from ours, Dante can be a valuable spiritual guide to lawyers who are unhappy and disillusioned with their work and their life. True, Dante speaks in another language and uses a philosophical and religious framework that is foreign to many of us, even Twenty-First Century Christians. But that has never stopped spiritual seekers from drawing nourishment from his writings. For Dante, the Christian story was the "mythic vehicle that enabled him to explore the depths of what it meant to be human."[9] You don't have to be a Christian or a Catholic to take the journey with him. Dante provides a map of the inner journey that each of us can adjust to his or her own beliefs and experiences. The very first lines of the *Comedy* make this clear: "Midway in the journey of our life/ I came to myself."[10] By mixing plural and singular pronouns, Dante tells us that his journey is our journey. He represents the whole human race. Or, to put it in another way, we read Dante not for *information* but for *transformation*.[11] Therefore, I urge you to "translate" Dante to fit your own

7. *Id.*

8. MARY ANN GLENDON, A NATION UNDER LAWYERS: HOW THE CRISIS IN THE LEGAL PROFESSION IS TRANSFORMING AMERICAN SOCIETY 14 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1994).

9. ALAN JONES, THE SOUL'S JOURNEY: EXPLORING THE SPIRITUAL LIFE WITH DANTE AS GUIDE 24 (Harper San Francisco 1995).

10. DANTE ALIGHIERI, THE INFERNO, canto I, at 3 lines 1-2 (Robert Hollander & Jean Hollander trans., Doubleday 2000).

11. HARRIET RUBIN, DANTE IN LOVE: THE WORLD'S GREATEST POEM AND HOW IT MADE HISTORY 29 (Simon & Schuster 2004).

spiritual tradition and experience.[12] There are no experts here, only fellow pilgrims on the journey.

In this paper, I propose to focus on three stages in the *Divine Comedy* that represent three stages of the spiritual journey. First, *being lost.* The poem opens with Dante lost in a dark wood, corresponding to the spiritual situation of many lawyers today. Recall the title of Dean Kronman's book: *The Lost Lawyer.* Second, *taking the journey.* Dante moves from the dark wood through hell and purgatory on his journey of self-discovery. The lessons he learns can help anyone setting out on the spiritual journey. Third, *arriving home.* Dante ends his poem with a vision of what it means to find oneself and one's true destiny. Here we catch a glimpse of what a reinvigorated and reformed legal practice would look like. Let's consider each of these three stages in turn.

BEING LOST

It may be the most famous opening passage in all literature: "Midway in the journey of our life/I came to myself in a dark wood, /for the straight way was lost."[13] The *Divine Comedy* begins at a specific time—it is Spring 1300, and the poet is 35 years old, precisely half of the Biblical "three score years and ten."[14] Dante awakens to find himself in a strange, dreamlike terrain. He does not know where he is or how he got there. When he sees the first rays of dawn atop a nearby mountain, he begins to climb toward the light that offers a way out. He scarcely begins, however, when three beasts appear—a leopard, a lion, and a wolf—and drive him back down the slope. All seems lost when Dante spies a figure: it is the Roman poet Virgil, author of the *Aeneid*, whom Dante admires above others and has sought to emulate in his own poetry. Virgil tells Dante that he cannot reach the light by taking the easy path up the mountain. Instead, he must take another more-perilous path that leads down through hell.

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12. JONES, *supra* note 9 at 42-43. My approach parallels that of Alan Jones:

> Dante's is but one map of the inner journey, and he gives names to certain places that will seem strange to those who are ignorant of or who react against the Catholic Christian tradition . . . . If the word *sin* is off-putting, try *brokenness* or *alienation.* If the words *church* and '*empire*' drive you crazy, find other words that speak of community and communion. If you are from a religious tradition other than Christianity, translate.

Id. at 42-43.

13. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto I, at 3, lines 1-3.

14. *Isaiah* 38:10. Dante's opening lines echo *Isaiah* 38:10: "In the noontime of my days/ I must depart/; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol [the underworld]/ for the rest of my years." All Biblical quotations are from THE NEW OXFORD ANNOTATED BIBLE: NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION WITH THE APOCRYPHA (3rd ed., Oxford Univ. Press 2001).

Dante is understandably afraid, unsure whether he has the courage to make the journey. He gains confidence to begin only when Virgil explains that the saints in heaven—including the Virgin Mary and Dante's deceased love, Beatrice[15]—have sent Virgil to guide Dante. With his courage bolstered, Dante begins his journey.

What can lawyers learn from this strange scene? First of all, Dante teaches that the spiritual journey begins where you are.[16] Dante awakens in a dark wood "for the straight way was lost."[17] That is where his journey must begin. If you are depressed about your work, and feel that it has lost its meaning, that is where you must start. As counselors Bonney and Richard Schaub say:

> Any one of us could probably think of a dark wood in which we've found ourselves at some point during the journey of our own life. Contemporary forms of that wood that we often hear about are the depression, anxiety, and stress-related illnesses that afflict so many people. But there are also many subtler forms of feeling lost in the darkness .... In our own experience, having worked intimately with hundreds of patients over a thirty-year career, we have found that the single most pervasive form of feeling lost is living with a nagging sense of unfulfilled promise. That feeling of lost opportunity, of the road not taken, of the cup half-empty, of another kind of life we never got to know, of 'if only I had . . .' operates just beneath the surface for many of us, generating a quiet frustration, disappointment, and often an embarrassing and therefore hidden jealousy of the lives of others.[18]

That "nagging sense of unfulfilled promise" is at the root of lawyers' spiritual crisis. Many lawyers today are experiencing what Dante scholar Robert Royal calls the "hollowness at midlife" (although it need not occur at chronological midlife).[19] They feel trapped, alienated, and alone. Like Dante, they are "world-weary, caught in stale words, and have stale ways

15. We know little about Beatrice, although she has been identified with Beatrice Portinari of Florence. Dante was born in 1265 and Beatrice is about one year younger. Dante first saw Beatrice when he was nine. Dante married Gemma Donati in the mid-1280s and Beatrice married a wealthy banker a year or two later. According to Dante, Beatrice died in 1290. Dante's first great work of poetry, LA VITA NUOVA, is "an idealized account of how Beatrice's miraculous influence shaped his life, both as a lover and a poet." DANTE ALIGHIERI, THE DIVINE COMEDY OF DANTE ALIGHIERI, VOLUME I: INFERNO 11 (Robert M. Durling ed., trans., Oxford Univ. Press 1996) [hereinafter INFERNO]. For accounts of the life of Beatrice, *see id.* at 11-12; *see also* RUBIN, *supra* note 11, at 16-18. For a recent biography of Dante, *see generally* R.W.B. LEWIS, DANTE (Penguin Group 2001).

16. BONNEY GULINO SCHAUB & RICHARD SCHAUB, DANTE'S PATH: A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO ACHIEVING INNER WISDOM 9 (Gotham Books 2003).

17. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto I, at 3, line 3.

18. SCHAUB & SCHUAB, *supra* note 16, at 11-12.

19. ROBERT ROYAL, DANTE ALIGHIERI: DIVINE COMEDY, DIVINE SPIRITUALITY 37 (Crossroad Pub'g Co. 1999).

of thinking and feeling."[20] Some lawyers become depressed and apathetic about their work; they hate what they do but continue doing it for the money or the status it provides. As a successful Philadelphia lawyer once told me, "I feel like a prostitute but law pays better." You can taste the bitterness and self-loathing in his remark. Perhaps the worst thing about hating your work is the effect upon the self. If you think of your work as a meaningless waste of time and energy, it diminishes your own value. You end up hating yourself for wasting your life. Sometimes this self-hatred sinks below the surface and remerges in disguised form as self-destructive behavior like drug or alcohol abuse. I have known lawyers who eat too much, drink too much, party too hardy, all in the futile attempt to escape a shadowy sense of self-hatred that will not let them go. Self-abuse is self-hatred transformed into self-punishment. Other lawyers, feeling lost, make a desperate effort to convince themselves of the importance of their work. They are the overachievers and the workaholics. Work is their entire life. Everything else suffers—family and friends fall by the wayside, cherished hobbies are forgotten, their own health is jeopardized—in their frantic efforts to do more and earn more. They make their work into a kind of god—a point I'll return to later.

If I'm lost, I need to admit that I'm lost. Dante uses the words, "I came to myself."[21] The Italian words are *mi retrovai* convey "the sense of a sudden shocked discovery."[22] Dante experiences a "moral awakening" when he realizes he has lost the true path.[23] The same is true for us, we truly awaken at the moment we acknowledge that our work has become dry and lifeless, which is not an easy thing to admit. Dante thought he could escape the dark wood by climbing toward the light, but he soon learned there is no quick fix, no easy way out. Our first impulse may be the same as Dante's. We may look for a quick fix—a new job, a new marriage, a few hours of therapy, a new designer drug. But we soon discover that our way is blocked, that the leopard, the lion, and the wolf will not let us pass. Most commentators correlate these three animals in Dante's *Inferno* with the tripartite division of hell, in which case they probably stand for incontinence, violence, and fraud.[24] Whatever their allegorical meanings, the three beasts represent the passions and failings that block Dante's way towards self-fulfillment. They are the transgressions—the sins, if you

20. RUBIN, *supra* note 11, at 42.
21. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto I, at 3, line 2.
22. *Id.*
23. INFERNO, *supra* note 15, at 34.
24. *See* ALIGHIERI, supra note 10, at 15-16 (discussing the various meanings proposed by scholars of the leopard, lion and wolf).

will—that frustrate him and rob his life of meaning; just like our weaknesses, failings, and mistakes block us from the light.

The bad news is that the only path out of the dark wood leads through hell. There is no substitute for self-knowledge, and self-knowledge comes at a price: "[w]ithout going to hell and gaining the knowledge to be found there, the Pilgrim [Dante] would be fated to keep repeating his patterns of suffering and experiencing the same obstacles to reaching the 'light.'"[25] It is the journey through hell that strips us of our illusions about ourselves and shows us how lost we really are.

The good news is that we don't have to stay lost. We don't have to live our lives mired in self-loathing, depression, or meaninglessness. The *Divine Comedy* is a comedy, after all, not a tragedy. It promises a happy ending. The other good news is that we're not alone. Before his journey even begins, Dante learns that higher powers have taken pity on him and sent Virgil to guide him. None of us make the journey alone, heaven is on our side. There are forces of wholeness and growth that support us. Like Dante, we find that "all sorts of human and divine help becomes available, if we start to open our hearts and minds to it."[26] The question is whether we're willing to take the first step and open up to it.

TAKING THE JOURNEY

Dante descends into hell, ascends the mountain of purgatory, and eventually reaches the starry realms of heaven. Most readers find hell the most interesting part of the journey. Here, Dante comes face to face with his own brokenness and witnesses the consequences of making the wrong choices and loving the wrong objects. Here, he encounters a riotous throng of humanity: lovers and liars; gluttons, heretics and murderers; friends, contemporaries and enemies; priests and popes; legendary Greek and Roman heroes; Judas Iscariot and even Lucifer himself. It's impossible to do justice in a few pages to Dante's complex theological and poetic vision, but fortunately my purpose is more modest, I only want to look at a few pivotal themes and episodes in the *Inferno* for the light they shed on the spiritual crisis afflicting lawyers and their profession.

INSIDE THE GATES OF HELL

At the start of their journey, Dante and Virgil pass through the gates of hell, inscribed with the terrifying words, "Abandon all hope, you who

25. SCHAUB & SCHUAB, *supra* note 16, at 19.
26. ROYAL, *supra* note 19, at 49.

enter here."[27] Hell is the place where there is no hope, nothing ever changes and everything is static and repetitive. Although the sinners blame everyone else for their plight, they have no one to blame but themselves. As the Schaubs explain: "That hopelessness [in hell] . . . turns out to be self-inflicted, because it is based on the fact that the people in hell refuse to recognize or learn from their own negative behaviors and states of mind, and are, therefore, compelled to repeat them eternally."[28] Contrary to what some people think, Dante does not picture hell as a fiery prison created by a vengeful God to torture sinners. Dante's hell is "a metaphor for the serious earthly consequences of moral abdication."[29] The punishments in hell are the "ultimate and necessary flourishing of the sin itself."[30] People get what they deserve; they reap what they sow (which is why the punishment for each sin differs according to the sin, the punishment always fits the crime).[31] In a marvelously insightful phrase, Dante says that for the sinners waiting to cross over into hell, "their very fear is turned to longing."[32] All along they have been seeking hell—and now they get what they wanted, sin is its own reward.[33] We too get what we want.

For Dante, a human life is not a trivial thing but the canvass on which a great story is being played out. Our choices have important consequences, what we do matters. Indeed, Dante insists on "the eternal significance of what we do on Earth."[34] If I invest my entire self in my work, I will pay the price in broken relationships and self-alienation. If I abandon ethics at work, the roots of my moral values will gradually shrivel up and die. If I worship money or success, I will get the god I want, even if it's a false god unworthy of my devotion. We get what we want - but if we want nothing we get nothing.

Just inside the gates of hell, Dante meets the neutral angels and the morally indifferent. The first group consists of those who refuse to take sides in the great battle between Lucifer and God, while the second group consists of the "passionless people who lived without praise or blame, and thus never truly lived."[35] They are the living dead, the nowhere men, who

27. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto III, at 43, line 9.

28. SCHAUB & SCHUAB, *supra* note 16, at 37.

29. JOSEPH GALLAGHER, TO HELL AND BACK WITH DANTE: A MODERN READER'S GUIDE TO THE DIVINE COMEDY 3 (Triumph Books 1996).

30. *Id.* at 4.

31. *See generally* ANTHONY K. CASSEL, DANTE'S FEARFUL ART OF JUSTICE (Univ. of Toronto Press 1984) (discussing Dante's concept of retaliatory punishment called *contrapasso*).

32. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto III, at 51, line 126.

33. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 52.

34. ROYAL, *supra* note 19, at 48.

35. GALLAGHER, *supra* note 29, at 12.

lived without dreams and desires. Neither heaven nor hell will take them in. Fittingly, they spend eternity frantically chasing a banner that says nothing, while wasps and flies sting them and blood flows down their faces.[36] I think Dante would include among the indifferent all those persons who recognize that they have lost their way, but do nothing about it. I've known lawyers like that: they hide behind a veneer of cynicism or sarcasm; they hate their jobs but won't leave; they go through the motions without caring about what they do or who gets hurt. The life slowly seeps out of them. I can't help thinking about a lawyer who visited me soon after I had decided to leave my job (at a large multi-city law firm). He was frankly envious of me, he said. He hated his work but could not leave because he had expensive house payments and two children in private school. He felt trapped but couldn't see a way out. He was one of the "neutrals" who refuse to take responsibility for living the life he wanted. He could not or would not take the risk of changing. The last time I checked he was still at the same firm.

A LESSON IN LOVE

Dante's journey continues ever downward through the many levels of hell—he visits the virtuous pagans; he encounters those who sinned in the flesh (through lust, gluttony, and greed, for example); he descends even deeper into hell and meets those who were violent against themselves (the suicides) and those who were violent against God along with other people; until he finally enters the realm of fraud, where he meets the deceitful and the treacherous. While we can not examine all of these encounters, we can say a few things about what Dante learns and what that might mean for us.

Dante's key insight—and what makes him relevant for all times and places—is that good and evil share the same source: *love.* His entire journey is a lesson in love, good love and bad love, authentic love and false love, love of self and love of others. For Dante, "we do everything, even evil, because of one or another love."[37] Our misery results from making the wrong choices and loving the wrong things. The biggest challenge in life is not to get what you want, but to know what you need.

Hell is the abode of those who have chosen the wrong loves. Some of these false loves have a special significance for lawyers. For example, In Canto VI, Dante meets the gluttons, whose punishment is to lie in "a kind of cosmic garbage dump" where hailstones and filthy rain fall on them

36. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto III, at 47, lines 66-67.
37. ROYAL, *supra* note 19, at 57.

forever.[38] We should be careful not to think of gluttony only as eating or drinking too much. A glutton is anyone who uses material things in excess. Gluttons sense that there is something wrong with their life, but they turn aside from the hard work of self-knowledge, to things that will only bring them instant pleasure. They fear the price they will have to pay and lose themselves in mindless "compulsive consumption," a vice our culture encourages.[39] They must have the best wines, the biggest TV screen or the nicest house at the shore. They resemble Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards a level of hell. Cerberus "howls incessantly, its body twitching, wanting only to consume more. Virgil obliges by throwing handfuls of slime into its three needy mouths, and the monster immediately starts devouring the slime. What is the metaphoric significance of all this waste and excrement? It is the waste of people's lives."[40] More than a few lawyers waste their lives this way, consuming material possessions at the expense of their inner well-being.

Gluttony is not just a personal sin or a defect of character. For Dante, it has political repercussions as well, that is why Canto VI has so many references to the political troubles in Florence. Excessive consumption hurts the community: "Conspicuous consumption is a threat to civic life because luxury undermines our common life by protecting us from having to enter into the messy business of relating to one another."[41] For Dante, the individual and the communal dimensions of life cannot be separated. Yet, we do, and by doing so fracture the ties that bind us as persons when we isolate ourselves in gated communities or vacation in Caribbean resorts swept free of the unsightly natives.

The next level of hell is inhabited by the greedy and the prodigal: those who hoarded the earth's wealth or wasted it. Dante sees two great crowds pushing heavy stones; the two groups move in a circular direction, clash and reverse, only to clash again. Dante wryly notes at this level of hell, "the sinners were more numerous than elsewhere."[42] In one of his frequent swipes at the institutional church, he observes clergymen—including popes and cardinals—among the greedy. Dante treats greed as another example of misplaced love. Yet, as humans we are taught there is nothing wrong with worldly goods. They are good things created by a good God. However, these lesser goods too often assume godlike proportions in our lives. We let the size of our paycheck or office become

38. GALLAGHER, *supra* note 29, at 19.
39. SCHAUB & SCHUAB, *supra* note 16, at 42.
40. *Id.* at 42-43.
41. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 69.
42. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, canto VII, at 119, line 25.

a sign of divine favor, proof that we are someone important, someone special. As Alan Jones notes, "[m]oney easily becomes a substitute for transcendence."[43] For Dante, the "disordered love of money and things is an idolatry that turns us away from the Absolute Love, God."[44]

An idol need not be a carved statue or a hunk of bone—it is any finite thing we invest with infinite significance. An idol promises security, contentment, and freedom, but cannot deliver on its promises. We often encounter the telltale signs of idolatry among successful businesspeople and lawyers. How else are we to explain the wealthy corporate executive who falsifies documents to drive up stock prices and earn even more? If one or two million dollars isn't enough, will ten or twenty suffice? Will a hundred? How much does he or she need to fill that aching hole in the self? Or what about the law firm that begrudges *pro bono* activity out of fear it might reduce the partners' piece of the pie? Or the corporate lawyer who is so intent on keeping the customer satisfied that he swallows his ethics and tells the client only what the client wants to hear? Professor Thomas Shaffer argues that money is the most serious ethical issue facing lawyers.[45] This is so for a number of reasons. The enormously high earnings of lawyers are themselves a "moral problem because they corrupt."[46] Studies show that lawyers disbarred for stealing from their clients were already well paid before they started stealing.[47] But the more we have the more we want, and the more we want the more we're willing to do to get it. A second problem is that lawyers, by and large, serve money and the powers that be. The poor and much of the middle-class simply cannot afford a lawyer. Most lawyers spend their time and talents helping the wealthy stay wealthy. Lawyers are well situated to influence corporations to do the right thing, but rarely do. Instead, says Shaffer, the "evidence is that, in terms of political, social, and economic bias, lawyers who serve business become like their clients."[48] In short, lawyers have grown too comfortable:

> We lawyers. We lawyers, who have deceived ourselves. We have lost (or never developed) our ability to be angry at the injustice around us. First, we don't see the injustice around us, as the [Hebrew] Prophets did, because we are too comfortable—so that seeing injustice, and naming it for what it is, would disturb our comfort. And then, even if

43. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 69.
44. ROYAL, *supra* note 19, at 64.
45. Thomas L. Shaffer, *Jews, Christians, Lawyers, and Money*, 25 VT. L. REV. 451, 451-59 (2001).
46. *Id.* at 452.
47. *Id.*
48. *Id.* at 454-55.

> we do see the injustice around us, we take it in stride. We say it is intractable; we are doing as much as we can about it; the injustice and pain of exploitation is part of the way things are; the tide is rising, thanks to us, and a rising tide lifts all boats.[49]

If Shaffer is right, and I think he is, lawyers may see their own faces reflected among the greedy in hell. Greed, I suggest, is an occupational disease among lawyers; we don't all catch it, but our workplace makes us particularly susceptible. I need to routinely check myself for the telltale symptoms of the sickness: How much do I love the trappings of wealth? Do I only serve the wealthy and powerful? Have I grown too comfortable? For the Christian lawyer, there is another even more troubling question: Have I forgotten that I will be judged not by my power and possessions, but by how well I serve the lost, the lonely, and the dispossessed? Jesus' words offer little comfort to those who have grown too comfortable: "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."[50]

TREATING PEOPLE LIKE THINGS

Let me draw some conclusions from this brief snapshot of hell. Dante believes that human beings possess free will and are personally responsible for their actions. The task is to choose wisely. Often, however, we choose poorly. We love the wrong things too much or the right things too little. We confuse temporal things with God. The result is isolation, alienation, and the "terrible loss of choice."[51] As Jones puts it, "[w]hat distressed Dante and what he found in hell was the loss of all right relations to people and things. People were treated like things and things like people."[52]

That's a good guideline for recognizing hell in our lives: *Hell is wherever and whenever we treat people like things and things like people.* When do I find myself in hell? Is it at work? Do I treat clients, colleagues, or opponents as mere things? Do I follow the crowd rather than my conscience? Would I rather win at any cost than be right? Have I been making sacrifices to the gods of money and success?

Consider for a moment our relationships with clients. Dante reserves one of the deepest regions of hell for the fraudulent counselors, those who use their powerful position to deceive.[53] Here we find "the religious,

49. Thomas L. Shaffer, *Lawyers as Prophets*, 15 ST. THOMAS L. REV. 469, 470 (2003).
50. *Matthew* 25:31-46.
51. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 45.
52. *Id.* at 65.
53. ALIGHIERI, *supra* note 10, at cantos XXVI-XXVII, at cantos 26-27 of the Inferno.

political, and legal leadership of ancient times who failed to use their authority to bring their community closer to happiness. Rather than using their power to pursue basic goods, these souls successfully lined their own products with ill-gotten gains."[54] I become a fraudulent counselor when I abdicate responsibility for my actions by becoming the mere hired gun of my client. Or when I go to the other extreme and treat my client not as a person, but as an object to be manipulated and controlled. At their best, clients and lawyers form a moral community, but in hell there is no community—only persons can form a community, not things.

Hell is not a pretty place to visit. None of us would choose to go there if we could avoid it. Recall how Dante sought the easy path out of the dark woods. But we must journey through hell in order to learn the deepest truths about ourselves. We must enter hell and confront our own poor choices and disordered loves. Fortunately, hell is not the end of the journey. Go down deep enough and you'll find yourself back on the surface.

CLIMBING THE MOUNTAIN OF PURGATORY

At the conclusion of his journey through hell, Dante emerges into the night air and sees the stars above him. It is Easter Sunday, the day of rebirth and resurrection. Virgil and Dante are standing on the slopes of Mount Purgatory. Purgatory—from the Latin "to make pure"—is the place of purgation where souls learn self-discipline and prepare themselves for heaven. It is a place of good news. As Jones says, "purgatory is a breath of fresh air after the stifling atmosphere of the inferno. Here, at last, is a place of hope and change. The good news is that we are not as stuck as we thought we were."[55]

All the souls in purgatory are saved. Purgatory is not a place of punishment but of education. There are seven terraces on which the souls encounter the seven capital sins: pride, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. As the souls repent and purge themselves of their sins, they ascend the mountain and move closer to the time when they will enter the transcendent state of heaven. As in hell, the path is not a straight one. The souls in purgatory must take a spiral path from terrace to terrace, again reminding us that the spiritual journey is never simple or straightforward. But we shouldn't become discouraged by the inevitable stops and starts,

54. Robert J. Cosgrove, Comment, *Damned to the Inferno? A New Vision of Lawyers at the Dawning of the Millennium*, 26 FORDHAM URB. L.J. 1669, 1669-70 (1999).

55. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 104.

dead ends, and missed opportunities:

> Over and over again, Dante finds that he cannot get to where he wants to in a straight line. His actual path twists and turns in the same way that his life and character have been twisted and bent out of shape by wrong turns, infidelities, and betrayals. All the vices distort us and twist us away from our true path. Dante's message is that by climbing up and circling the mountain we, whom the world has made crooked, are made straight. It is a turning from false ways to true ones.[56]

Many of the sins punished in hell are found in purgatory, but there is a great difference: "The souls in *Purgatory* suffer the same kinds of torments as those in the *Inferno*; but they suffer with willing acceptance instead of with bitter resentment, because they have dared to recognize meaning and to accept responsibility."[57] This is the critical distinction between hell and purgatory. You're lost in a dark wood. You don't know how to regain meaning in your life. As you learn more about yourself, you drop down into hell. You learn how broken you are. This self-knowledge is the first step towards transformation, but knowledge alone isn't sufficient. Knowledge can leave you in hell. You escape hell and enter purgatory when you assume responsibility for your good and bad choices—when you start trying to fix what is wrong.

THE PLACE OF CONVERSION

Think of purgatory as the land of second chances and second choices.[58] It's the place of *conversion*—literally, turning around. Conversion is not repression. The goal is not to eliminate our desire; the goal is to discipline and re-order those desires. Our poor choices and mistakes enslave us. In purgatory we learn how to break free of this bondage. We learn how to move from knowledge to action. Dante emphasizes this in a number of ways. The first one-third of the *Purgatorio* takes place in ante-purgatory, the shoreline at the foot of the mountain where those who were late turning to God must wait before they begin their ascent: "Those who delayed 'waking up' must wait at least as long as they delayed before they can make the ascent."[59] Dante meets a variety of souls in this purgatorial waiting room who all share one trait: they wasted the time they could have used for self-discipline and self-growth. One group is especially interesting. These are the rulers who were late to repent. They

56. *Id.* at 115.

57. HELEN M. LUKE, DARK WOOD TO WHITE ROSE: JOURNEY AND TRANSFORMATION IN DANTE'S DIVINE COMEDY 49 (Parabola Books 1989).

58. RUBIN, *supra* note 11, at 144.

59. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 104.

include princes, kings, and emperors. Although they were good rulers, they were so consumed by their work that they did not attend to their spiritual life. Perhaps there is a warning here for lawyers as well. Dorothy Sayers speculates that Dante would include among this group "anxious parents, over-burdened housewives and breadwinners, social workers, busy organizers, and others who are so 'rushed off their feet' that they forget to say their prayers."[60] Or so busy at work and home that they have no time for their inner life. Their spiritual journey stalls out because of all the other things demanding their attention. How much easier it is to schedule one more meeting during the week or one more round of golf on the weekend.

Ante-purgatory reminds me of the realm of the morally indifferent that we encountered in hell. But there is a difference. Hell is for eternity; the time in ante-purgatory can be shortened. The prayers of other people are the only thing that can lessen a soul's time here. The late repentant constantly entreat Dante to pray for them, and beg him to bring that message back to their family on earth. Their only prayer is that others pray for them.[61] As Manfred, the son of Emperor Frederick II says, "here much can be gained from those on earth."[62] Dante's message is that you and I can help each other on the journey of conversion. "Hell is seeing every other human being as a rival—as someone against whom to define oneself. Purgatory is beginning to see them not only as allies but as essential to one's happiness."[63] We're in it together. We need each other.

Consider again the lawyer-client relationship.[64] Too often that relationship is seen solely as a species of contract—each party has specific obligations to the other, and if either fails in those obligations, the other may resort to legal remedies. The parties are viewed as rational and autonomous individuals who come together to accomplish a limited objective; there is no sense that they have embarked upon a joint venture in which they might change and grow together.

This contractual ethic is minimalistic and lives by the letter of the law. There is no place in it for "going the extra mile," for doing what you're not required to do, for acting with care, compassion, or friendship. Dante sees relationships differently. He would say that the soul is fundamentally social. He would agree with the philosopher Martin Buber:

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60. RUBIN, *supra* note 11, at 66.

61. DANTE ALIGHIERI, PURGATORIO 109 (Jean Hollander & Robert Hollander, trans., Doubleday 2003) [hereinafter PURGATORIO].

62. *Id.* at 57.

63. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 131.

64. *See generally* Joseph Allegretti, *Lawyers, Clients, and Covenant: A Religious Perspective on Legal Practice and Ethics*, 66 FORDHAM L. REV. 1101 (1998).

"In the beginning is relation."[65] We become who we are through our relationships with each other.[66] Rather than seeing our relations with clients solely through the lens of contract, we might supplement that approach with what I call the *covenantal model*.[67] My client and I are not strangers, isolated and alienated from each other; instead, we share a common destiny that is forged in our encounter with each other. In a covenant each party respects the other. Each party is open to change.

Neither the lawyer nor the client has to ignore or suppress moral questions. In a covenant our obligations go beyond "the letter of the law" and are measured not by our explicit commitments but by the needs of the other. The client is not just a commodity or a fee payer but is a human being who is probably in pain and emotional turmoil. Covenant places limits on the capacity of the more powerful party—whether lawyer or client—to take advantage of the weaker.

THE TERRACE OF PRIDE

During his journey through purgatory, Dante is constantly reminded of the importance of taking concrete steps toward conversion. All the souls he meets are engaged in their own acts of repentance, cleansing themselves of their mistakes, turning their lives around. Dante confronts this most directly on the terrace of pride, for here he comes face to face with his own need for repentance. On the terrace of the prideful, Dante and Virgil see souls carrying huge rocks on their backs. They are bent so far over that their faces nearly touch the ground. Dante hears indistinct voices from beneath the boulders and bends down to hear what the souls are saying.

This is a pivotal moment in Dante's own journey towards conversion: "By presenting us with this image of the Pilgrim humbling himself to take the same position as the prideful sufferer, Dante is showing us that the Pilgrim recognizes and accepts his own pride."[68] Dante's action is no mere gesture. It demonstrates again that conversion requires more than knowledge of our faults. True conversion requires action: "Acknowledgment is reinforced and healing made possible by saying out loud what we have done to somebody else. We have to be willing to make reparation whenever possible (it is no use confessing one has stolen a million dollars and then expecting to keep the loot)."[69] Once we identify

65. *Id.* at 1117.
66. *Id.*
67. *Id.* at 1116-29.
68. SCHAUB & SCHUAB, *supra* note 16, at 99.
69. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 107.

the behaviors that have driven us into the dark wood, we have to deal with them. It's no use complaining that work leaves me no time for my family and myself unless I begin to right the balance. If I am tempted to make an idol out of money, then I need to begin living more selflessly and generously. Or if pride is my problem (and Dante sees it as a problem for everyone, since all the souls in purgatory must spend time on this terrace), I have to begin practicing humility. One of the souls Dante meets, Omberto of Tuscany, explains pride as "an overwhelming need to excel at any cost."[70] If that is the root cause of pride, then we have to confront our inflated sense of self-importance (which, of course, is a mask to cover our feelings of inadequacy). We have to accept that our self-worth is not tied to our successes or failures. Humility is a form of realism—it's accepting that I have value in and of myself (Jews and Christians would say that I have unconditional value because I am made in God's image and likeness). Concretely, we practice humility whenever we make room for the other and put the other's interests above our own. As St. Paul said in his *Letter to the Philippians*, "[d]o nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others."[71]

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the changes we must make. But as we saw earlier, we are not alone. We must take the first steps to change the behaviors that caused our spiritual crisis in the first place. These first steps are only that; they are the beginnings of conversion. But Dante would also say that once we take those first fumbling steps, we open ourselves to the grace and power that is eager to help us. As Dante prepares to leave the terrace of the prideful, Virgil tells him to stand upright. Dante immediately notices how much easier it is to climb up the mountain. A great weight has been lifted from him. We're all weighed down by our imperfections, mistakes, and pride. The first steps are the hardest, but as we deal with our weaknesses, the path gets easier.

COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY

Dante also learns that companions make the journey easier. We saw earlier that Dante cannot even begin his journey until Virgil appears. Someone - first Virgil, then Beatrice, then Bernard of Clairvaux - is always with him. Dante also learns the importance of companions when he encounters the wrathful in purgatory. In hell the wrathful are trapped in

70. PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, canto XI, at 221, lines 86-87.
71. *Philippians* 2:3-4.

smoke and mud where they scream and fight. In purgatory the wrathful are blinded by smoke as well, but they are singing the *Agnus Dei* ("Lamb of God") with one voice. One of the souls, Marco of Lombard, walks with Dante: "I will follow as far as is permitted,/ . . . and if the smoke keeps from seeing,/ hearing will keep us joined instead."[72] If we can't see each other, hearing will keep us joined. We won't be separated. We'll still be there for each other.

Many of the lawyers I talk to emphasize the need for spiritual companionship. We all need a Virgil. We need people to support us and encourage us; we need people to console us in our dark nights. We also need people to call us back to our better selves when we go astray. Neither Virgil nor Beatrice is at all shy about chastising Dante when he needs it. We may find our traveling companions anywhere—at a church, perhaps, or over dinner, or standing in line at the grocery store. During my years in a large law firm, I struggled to maintain a sense of equilibrium and to find meaning in what I was doing. I was helped greatly by a small group of law school friends who were associates in other firms in town. We would meet for lunch every few weeks and talk about our work and our lives. These meetings were a source of both comfort and fraternal correction for me.

PUTTING FIRST THINGS FIRST

Perhaps the simplest way to summarize the message of the *Purgatorio* is: *We need to put first things first.* This is what the penitents are learning on the mountain and what we need to learn. This is expressed most clearly in the middle cantos of the *Purgatorio* (which are the middle cantos of the entire *Divine Comedy*, surely no coincidence). In these cantos Dante has two important conversations. The first is with Marco of Lombard. Dante wants to know the reason for evil. Is it due to the stars? Is evil built into the very fabric of the cosmos or are humans responsible for what they do? Marco admits that there are outside forces that influence us—today we would point to genetics, our upbringing, our peer groups. But we are not compelled to follow these influences:

> Yes, the heavens give motion to your inclinations.
> I don't say all of them, but, even if I did,
> you still possess a light to winnow good from evil,
> and you have free will . . . .
> Therefore, if the world around you goes astray,
> in you is the cause and in you let it be sought.[73]

72. *See* PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, canto XVI, at 327, lines 34-36.
73. *See* PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, at 329, line 73-83.

The great Dante scholar Charles Singleton calls free will the central theme of the *Purgatorio*.[74] We often blame outside influences for the evil that we do or the good that we fail to do. *Don't blame me. It's not my fault. I was only following the rules.* Dante insists that these outside influences do not control our actions. We can choose right from wrong. I may feel pressure to lie or cheat; I may say to myself "everyone does it" and therefore so should I; I may work in a culture or a profession that rewards deceit and punishes honesty—but ultimately I am responsible for the life I live. That is the underpinning of the entire *Divine Comedy*; Dante's intricate moral architecture of reward and punishment presupposes freedom of the will.

In these same middle cantos of the *Purgatorio*, Dante and Virgil discuss human love. As we have already seen, Dante believes that love is the engine that drives the machinery of our lives. Love, says Virgil, derives ultimately from God. Human beings naturally desire the good.[75] But since humans also have free will, they may choose the wrong things to love (the sin of envy, for example, occurs when we desire harm to befall our neighbor); or they may choose the right things to love but love them too little (the sin of sloth); or they may choose the right things to love but love them too much (the sins of lust and gluttony). Love, says Virgil, is the seed of every virtue and every vice.[76] Purgatory is the place where we learn how to love wisely:

> Purgatory is the labyrinth of desire where our longings are purified and liberated. Our struggle with desire makes it necessary for us to take sides . . . , to plunge into life and risk being mistaken. We have to decide how we are going to live, and the comedy of life is the drama of our deciding.[77]

What is it to be? What is most important to me? What will I put first?

Our tragedy comes in mistaking inferior loves for true love. These false loves can be very seductive, as Dante learns in a dream. He dreams of an ugly woman "stammering, cross-eyed, splayfooted/ with crippled hands and sickly pale complexion."[78] But as he looks at her she is transformed into a seductive "sweet siren." Like Ulysses, he finds himself unable to resist her song. In Dante's dream, though, Virgil seizes the seductress, tears at her garments, and reveals her stinking putrid belly. The woman

74. *See* GALLAGHER, *supra* note 29, at 92.
75. *See* PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, canto XVIII, at 362-71.
76. *Id.* at canto XVII, at 351, lines 103-105.
77. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 159.
78. PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, canto XIX, at 385, line 8-9.

represents the things of this world—sex, beauty, and the rest—that seduce us all too easily. These sweet things can be a kind of siren, deceiving us for a while, but they can't satisfy our deepest longings. When Dante finally understands this, he tearfully confesses to Beatrice that he has sinned by pursuing "false delights" that brought him only temporary pleasure not lasting joy.[79] Purgatory teaches us that "[n]othing on earth can satisfy the longings of the human heart, which will naturally look to some further fulfillment."[80] But what is the true good that can deliver the fulfillment it promises? And what does it mean to put first things first? For this we must travel with Dante from purgatory to the bright light of pure love that is paradise.

COMING HOME

I'm not sure if it reveals more about us or about Dante, but most readers find the *Paradiso* boring. Sin and punishment are fascinating; goodness puts us to sleep. That's a pity, really, because you can't understand the trip Dante makes—or the trip that I am suggesting we should make—unless you know what the goal is. The punishment of hell and the repentance of purgatory make no sense without a vision of the final good to which we are called.

For Dante, paradise is not a place. It's not a hole in the earth like hell, or a mountain like purgatory. That's part of the problem for readers. Paradise lacks the concrete imagery of hell and purgatory. As Teodolinda Barolini puts it, "Dante sets out to do what no one before or since has done: to represent paradise as a state beyond the coordinates of space-time, beyond the continuum that defines our lives and thoughts."[81] Virgil, the voice of human reason, is gone. Two heavenly souls - first Beatrice and then the mystic Bernard of Clairvaux - are Dante's guides. Dante rises through the planets and stars, encountering and conversing with various saints along the way, until his journey culminates in a brief but life-changing vision of God's glory.

How should we—fellow pilgrims with Dante—envision heaven? Perhaps it's best to think of heaven as a magnet drawing us forward. It's the bright light Dante saw when he first awoke in the dark wood. It's the meaning and fulfillment at the end of the journey. Or you could think of heaven as the home from which we have been exiled. Dante, after all, was

79. PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, canto XXXI, at 643, line 35.

80. ROYAL, *supra* note 19, at 148.

81. TEODOLINDA BAROLINI, THE UNDIVINE COMEDY: DETHEOLOGIZING DANTE 170 (Princeton Univ. Press 1992).

a man in exile. Soon after being elected one of the leaders of Florence, his political rivals threw him out of the city and sentenced him to death if he returned.[82] He spent the rest of his life in exile, wandering through Italy, without a true home, hoping for the reprieve that never came. Dante knows what it is to lose your home and try to regain it. That is why he is such a good companion for all of us who feel lost and exiled. The *Paradiso* is his vision of the homecoming denied him in this life.

We know that in hell there is only competition. It's you against me. It's a zero sum game. The journey from hell to paradise is the journey from "I" to "we." Alan Jones describes heaven like this:

> Our own reality depends upon being able and willing to include others. Thomas Merton wrote, "The more I am able to affirm others, to say 'yes' to them, . . . *the more real I am.* I am fully real if my own heart says *yes* to *everyone.* This, in fact, is precisely Dante's vision of heaven—the celebration of mutuality in a place where everyone is his or her unique self.[83]

This is the essence of Dante's heaven—mutuality that does not destroy our individuality. Heaven is *saying yes to everyone.* There is no private heaven: "Heaven is not a place of privacy but one of diversity and freedom where we make room for one another."[84] We catch a glimpse of heaven whenever we make room for each other, whenever we treat clients and colleagues with respect and dignity, whenever we pursue justice instead of personal success, whenever we embrace the poor and the outcast. In his talk on lawyers and money, Thomas Shaffer offers another glimpse of heaven. Shaffer says that lawyers who follow the Judeo-Christian moral tradition should be committed to

> returning to the poor what the rich have taken from them; recognizing that much of what we think we own in fact belongs to those who do not own so much; taking care that we own less—that we don't deceive ourselves about how much we need; distributing the difference to those who need it more; and observing, at the very least, the settled guidelines on accumulation and distribution [such as rules on tithing and strictures against excessive accumulation] that the religious tradition provides.[85]

As we say yes to everyone, as we share what we have, we don't lose a thing. This is the secret of paradise. In heaven love is increased, not diminished, by sharing. Virgil tells Dante that humans are too "fixed on

82. *See* Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The Life of Dante*, *in* RACHEL JACOFF, THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO DANTE 8-13 (Cambridge Univ. Press 1993) (giving the facts of Dante's exile).

83. JONES, *supra* note 9, at 19 (internal citations omitted).

84. *Id.* at 195.

85. Shaffer I, *supra* note 45, at 470.

things that, divided, lessen each one's share."[86] Things like money, success, and power. It is different in heaven: "and the more souls there are who love on high [in heaven],/ the more there is to love, the more of loving,/ for like a mirror each returns it to the other."[87] In heaven, each soul is a mirror of divine love. Each serves the other without qualification. When Dante, in Canto VIII journeys to Venus and sees the souls as dancing sparks of light, one speaks to him, "We are all ready to do your pleasure;/ we want you to have fullest joy of us . . . ./ We are so full of love that, if you wish,/ We happily will stop awhile for you."[88] The heavenly souls are happy to stop doing what gives them joy in order to help Dante. We experience a foretaste of heaven whenever we stop doing what brings us pleasure in order to help another, whenever we become mirrors reflecting love. The message of paradise, says Harriet Rubin, is to "open yourself to love and return it."[89]

Contentment with our lot in life is another sign of heaven. All the souls in heaven are satisfied where they are. Some are at a "higher" plane but that makes no difference, for each enjoys bliss in accordance with his or her capacity. One soul explains to Dante, "[b]rother, the virtue of our heavenly love,/ tempers our will and makes us want no more/ than what we have—we thirst for this alone."[90] In perhaps the most quoted line of the *Paradiso*, Piccardi Donati tells Dante, simply, "[i]n His [God's] will is our peace."[91] To be in heaven is to desire what God desires, to want what God wants for us. When we put aside envy, greed, and conspicuous consumption; when we cease to listen to those nagging doubts about our self-worth; when we no longer make an idol out of success—then we know the contentment that comes from accepting God's will.

Or, to put it in the language I used earlier, heaven is putting first thing first. All the little loves of Dante's life failed him. He loved Florence but Florence exiled him. He loved Beatrice but she married someone else and died soon after. His journey through the afterlife teaches him that he cannot put his trust in anything but God. God comes first or God is not your God. If you're uncomfortable using the word God, then ask yourself the question that St. John the Apostle asks Dante in the *Paradiso*: "[w]hat

86. PURGATORIO, *supra* note 61, canto VI, at 305, line 49-50.

87. *Id.* at 307, line 73-75.

88. DANTE ALIGHIERI, THE DIVINE COMEDY VOL. III: PARADISE 94 (Mark Musa trans., Penguin Books 1986) [hereinafter PARADISE].

89. RUBIN, *supra* note 11, at 218.

90. PARADISE, *supra* note 88, canto III, at 34, lines 70-72.

91. *Id.* at 35, line 85.

is it that your soul is set upon[?]"[92] What do you love above all? What do you love so much that it relativizes all the other loves in your life? Which one of your loves can deliver the meaning and fulfillment that your lesser loves cannot? Follow this love and it will lead you out of the dark wood. Follow this love and you will regain the straight way you have lost.

We end where we began. At the start of the *Inferno*, Dante glimpsed the light of the sun promising salvation. He tried to take a shortcut to reach the light but failed. Now, at the end of his journey, Dante sees the light clearly. He gazes upon God, the source of all light, the eternal light that is love. For an instant Dante becomes part of the light: "[L]ike a wheel in perfect balance turning,/ I felt my will and my desire impelled/ by the Love that moves the sun and other stars."[93] No longer must he search for meaning and purpose. He knows who he is and what he is here for. Dante has come home. And if he could find his way home, so can we. Truly, life is a divine comedy, not a tragedy—if we are willing to leave the dark wood and learn the lessons of love.

92. *Id.* at 306, line 7.
93. *Id.* at 394, lines 143-45.