

The Compassionate Practice of the Law

By Ms Lim Hui Min



The Law is impartial. And, by extension, the Law must not be subject to individual circumstances. Yet, the purpose of the Law is protect human welfare and dignity. In rounding up this issue, we share how the staff of the Legal Aid Bureau balance the unbending nature of the law with its softer purpose, through the compassionate practice of the Law. The following essay, “The Compassionate Practice of the Law”, is written by Ms Lim Hui. Ms Lim has worked in the area of family and juvenile law as a private practitioner, magistrate, district judge, and legal officer, for many years.

What would you do if you were a lawyer and your client said he wanted to kill himself?

Or if your client said that the nephew she was looking after had knelt down and begged her not to return him to his parents?

Or if your client’s wife told you that her new boyfriend was beating her and controlling her every movement?

These are real questions that my colleagues in the Legal Aid Bureau have faced when working on their cases. The Bureau provides legal services at no or low cost to the less privileged. Our clients (we call them “applicants”) talk to us about the problems they face, when they come to us for help.

Compassion: deviating from the safe, well-travelled road

Every conversation is a journey, and every new sentence opens up new paths, new possibilities.

The question we have to ask ourselves, from moment to moment, is whether we are on a road that we want to take, and how far we are willing to go.

The road that we would usually like to take is the safe road.

Something well-trodden by generations of employees before us, well-paved with Standard Operating Procedures, well-lit by precedent.

Something where the end is in sight, and clear. You know where you are going.

Every conversation is a journey, and every new sentence opens up new paths, new possibilities.



Whether your journey makes the world a better place for the person who has been sharing their heart with you, however, is a separate issue.

What would make someone deviate from the path well-travelled?

For my colleagues at the Bureau, it is compassion.

Listening not just to the words spoken, but to the feelings beneath. Caring enough for another human being to want him to continue living, as happily as he can.

This means asking more questions, and being responsible for dealing with the answers — sometimes, often, making a long day even longer and more difficult.

Client had detailed plan to kill himself

In the first case, after the applicant said he wanted to kill himself, the officer speaking to him asked him what his plan was.

She was alarmed when it seemed quite detailed.

He had decided he was going to kill himself by jumping to his death. He had picked the place — but refused to say where it was, because he did not want

to be found. But he said that he would not do it that day, or the next day.

He had a few things to do first, to put his affairs in order. He refused all offers of help. He was very calm.

The officer could not call the police as the applicant did not seem to be in any immediate danger to himself or anyone else.

After he left the office, however, she was very troubled. She consulted a supervisor, and they came up with a plan.

She got in touch with the Samaritans of Singapore, to ask them to reach out to him, since it was a case of life or death. They agreed to do so, and she called the applicant to persuade him to give them a chance to talk to him.

He reluctantly agreed. He is still alive today.

A young boy with a disturbing secret

In the second case, an aunt wanted guardianship of her nephew, who had been staying with her for some years.

The aunt said that the boy feared going home, and had even beaten his head with his hands in distress when the subject was brought up.





However, the aunt could not come up with any strong reasons for why the boy felt so distressed at the thought of going home.

More than six years ago, when he was living with his parents, his father had caned him hard when he was naughty. But there was no other incident of violence after that.

The officer could have just closed the case, for lack of evidence, but she decided to speak to the child personally.

Her instinct was justified. In that interview, the boy revealed to her that his father had molested him when they were living in the same house, by fondling his private parts every night.

The officer immediately referred the child to the Child Protective Service.

She was grateful to have been able to play a part in keeping him safe.

Helping the opposing party

In the third case, our applicant wanted a divorce from his wife.

We had asked the wife to come down to the office to discuss the divorce terms with us. She turned up with her boyfriend.

Our officer asked the boyfriend to leave the room, so he could speak to the wife privately.

The wife then confided to our officer that she was scared of her boyfriend. He would keep her locked up in the house, and often hit her. She wanted to leave him, but was afraid to.

Our officer referred her for help, with her consent, to an agency specialising in helping family violence victims.

She was not our applicant — but she was a human being in trouble.

Creating their own path

The officers in these cases had a choice of taking the usual route.

They need not have found out more than they were told, or taken a step more than what the Standard Operating Procedure mapped out.

They could have just made some progress with the rest of their case-files, and gone home that much earlier.

But they chose not to take this safe road.

You could say that they headed down the uncertain path, except that there was no path. They had to create it. They chose to listen, to understand, and to think about what they could do to make the world better for someone else.

And then they did it.

Who would make his own journey longer and harder, for the sake of another human being who is a stranger to him?

Lawyer jokes abound — some might even be justified — but every day in the Bureau, I see people who routinely turn the phrase “the compassionate practice of the law” from an oxymoron into reality.

This essay first appeared in *The Birthday Book 2018: The Roads We Take*, a collection of 53 essays by a range of Singaporeans and Singapore residents from multiple sectors, reflecting on our individual and collective journeys to mark the country’s 53rd year of independence. The book is available for purchase online at <https://thebirthdaycollective.com/store/>.

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