



By: Courtenay Presten, *Conley Griggs Partin, LLP*

For most of us, our life is shaped and conditioned by where we sit. When we look through the same lens every day, we start to believe that's the way that life looks. In other words, it's hard to see a real or different picture of life when we live inside the frame. Once we step outside the frame, our perception changes, as does our attitude, and hopefully, for the better. Because once we look through a new lens, or just a clean one, it can put us in a whole new place and on a better path.

Without true, undistorted perspective, we might not understand that even if we win the rat race, we are still rats. Or, we might discover that the Joneses, who we have been trying so hard to keep up with,

are actually the Schmucks. How does an astronaut feel when he or she looks back at earth? Differently, of course, because their perspective has changed. I was at the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles recently and during the planetarium show, I became acutely aware of just how small I am while looking at the earth, moon, stars, and galaxies from my comfortable theatre chair. As the narrator said at the end of the program, "We are all just particles of stardust." Sometimes when I am having a particularly difficult day I think about that concept and it makes me feel better. Stars are bright, shiny, magical and everyone loves them. Honestly, I am more than happy to think of myself as being made of stardust, just floating peacefully through the universe. When

we view ourselves in this way, it's amazing how we start to recognize our creativity, and to become just a little bit more thoughtful, interesting, flexible, and considerate. In essence, we are not human beings having a spiritual experience, but rather we are spiritual beings having a human experience.

As paralegals handling catastrophic injury and death cases, we tend to have a pretty good grasp on perspective. I am sure many of you can relate to the feeling when a friend or family member complains about something trivial. We spend our days enmeshed in the lives of those who have endured serious tragedy and it forever changes our view. I can say with some certainty that I bet there is

not a single one of us who does not think “there but by the grace of God go I” when we are working with our clients. Day in and day out we practice empathic listening. We listen and try to see the world as that person sees it. We use our perspective when dealing with co-workers, attorneys, defense counsel, experts, doctors, witnesses and jurors. Just by shifting the lens a little bit, we are able to see the point of view of those we interact with and it can only make a positive impact on those relationships. In particular, when we try to see a case from a juror’s perspective, that view can give us such incredible insight it will surely help us decide how we want to tell the story and present our case. Or, if we are working with a very difficult, over-booked expert, we can try to understand how they feel, that they are juggling numerous complicated cases and ours is not the only one. Sometimes just a touch of understanding and patience makes all the difference. Practicing this technique does not mean that we simply give up our perspective. It just means we add another viewpoint. And if this corrects our viewpoint even slightly it means we get a more correct picture of the issue. Once we get a bigger picture, we gain a perspective that is able to solve a solution that at first seemed unsolvable. Albert Einstein said, “problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.” And if we are to be completely honest, for the most part, it’s mainly us, the paralegals, who are able to have a change of perspective. In other words, we are the ones that need to be the most flexible and make sure

that our lens is adjusted to the situation at hand. It can take some courage to see the perspective of another person, acknowledge it and then look for the best solution for both. It requires discipline to show this perspective to the other person, but this will usually result in a win/win solution.

There are many days when I don’t feel very sparkly. In fact, I feel more like a chewed up, spit out piece of gum on the bottom of someone’s shoe. These are the days when the alarm goes off and I want to pull the covers over my head and never come out. I, like almost everyone alive, have dealt with some pretty tough stuff in my 51 years on this planet. By no means has it been easy or always fun. I have faced an incredibly tough divorce, breast cancer, and the indescribable excruciating pain of having a child with mental health and addiction issues. When I start to sink into the slimy pit of self-pity, I have to force myself to think that although I may be nothing more than an accumulation of stardust, I am needed on this planet. I am important and what I do is important. What I do every day at work has a direct impact on making someone’s life who is facing far greater challenges than me a little bit brighter. I like to think that no matter who you are, or what your job or profession, it is important. As a society we tend to put certain individuals on a pedestal while looking down upon others. And while I am incredibly grateful to the skilled attorney who negotiated my divorce, the talented breast surgeon who performed my double mastectomy

and removed the hideous cancer from my body, and the caring, nurturing mental health and addiction specialists who have worked so tirelessly to show my son a way out of the darkness, I am also intensely appreciative of the garbage crew who come twice a week and take away my trash, and the server at McDonalds who hands me a coffee and an egg white delight. Everyone has a purpose, and perhaps if we shift our perspective and learn to respect our fellow stardust companions on this planet, we would all be just a little bit happier and more at peace.

When the challenges of being a paralegal in an incredibly demanding environment seem overwhelming, or the sadness and depression start to creep in like a cold fog, just remember that you can change your perspective for the better. And not just for the better for you, but for all of those you encounter day to day. In fact, your change of perspective might be the key to figuring out that game changing fact in a troublesome case. What we do every day is tough. It requires brain cells and a strong stomach, but it is also incredibly rewarding. The feeling when you hear the foreman read a plaintiff’s verdict at trial, or when your case settles for far more than you imagined is like no other. However, defense verdicts and measly settlements do happen and while they definitely suck, again, we have to keep it all in perspective. So no matter what is happening at work or in your personal life, always forge ahead, remember to adjust your lenses, and

shine on.