

Inaugural Address

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2026–27 President*



Good afternoon, what a day! I want to be relatively brief. Now, for the lawyers out there, you know that every word matters. So, key here is my use of the word “relatively.” If you know me at all, then you know that brevity isn’t necessarily my strong suit.

I would not have made it to this point in my life and career without an inordinate amount of help from a lot of people. And I’m keenly aware of the fact that the many opportunities that God has blessed me with in terms of leadership positions are opportunities that have been granted to me so that I might serve others.

That said, my mother, Linda Johnson, is and has always been my North Star, I always felt like I had the built-in cheat code. All I had to do was follow her example. God, family, education, service above self, and most importantly, don’t take yourself too seriously...Laugh hard and laugh often.

My Aunt Catherine and my uncle, the late Reverend James Beasley — they helped raise me while my mother obtained her degree in Chemistry and began her career. They treated me like a prince whose feet never touched the ground, and they imbued me with a sense of pride and self-worth that resonates to this very day.

My beautiful wife, Barbara, and the two amazing humans that I call my children, Caleb and Ivy — I’ve never wanted to be anything more than a father. I couldn’t have imagined having amazing children like them. They inspire me to be a better person daily.

My favorite cousin, Cindy — I know that you’re not supposed to have favorites, but you’ve always been mine. When I was preparing to take the bar exam, Cindy gave me a beautifully written card. After I’d failed the bar, I continued to read it. Suffice it to say, her kind and inspiring words got me through some low, dark points in life. As I’m sure you’ll agree, sometimes we all lose our way and need to be guided back to our destiny.

I want to thank Loretta and the entire LSBA staff for all you do for our Bar and for Louisiana’s lawyers (all 23,168 of them). You consistently put us in the best position to serve the public and our profession.

And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank Dana Southern and Valerie DeLatte who made the trip to attend my inauguration and celebrate with me. Valerie is a fine Shreveport attorney, and Dana is to the Shreveport Bar what Loretta is to the LSBA — in a word, everything. I can’t thank you all enough.

There is one person who is not here, but if she were alive, there is no doubt in my mind that she not only would have made the trip, but also would have organized a caravan, just as she did when I graduated from college and law school. That person is my Aunt Eula Mae Horton.

Every church, synagogue, place of worship or organization has a Eula Mae...the singular force keeping everything going. She saw potential in me at an early age. To be honest, there is nothing I do today that I did not begin doing in my church because of Eula Mae. She saw I had the capacity to teach, so when I was in middle school, she encouraged me to teach Sunday school. I use “encouraged” with air quotes, she “voluntold” me, but in her special way, so it didn’t feel like a mandate. But, be it drums, speeches, teaching or taking on any leadership opportunity, I learned it all in my church.

And to that point, mine is a Jonah story. I moved back to Shreveport after attending Washington & Lee in Virginia for both undergraduate and law school. For whatever reason, I thought I could pass the Louisiana bar exam without taking a bar review course. So I bought the *Civil Codes* and the *Code of Civil Procedure* and went about studying for the bar. I mean, really, show me a test that I cannot pass. Well, you can see where this is going. They showed me a test that I did not pass.

I passed the four common law sections and flunked the five civil code sections. Much like Jonah, I fled from the practice of law. Rather than taking the bar again right away, I convinced the guys I had been playing music with in Virginia to move to New Orleans. We rented a place on Octavia Street in Uptown...on the other end of the street from Barry and Cheri Grodsky. IYKYK.

I taught language arts, social studies and religion at an all-boys Catholic middle school in the Marigny. And I got on with it. But something was missing. I found that I longed to practice law. I actually missed it.

So, I enrolled in a bar review course. If my band had a gig in Tallahassee, I would drive the van through the night back to New Orleans while the other band members slept and make my way to class. When we were traveling all over the West Coast, if I wasn’t driving, I was in the back of the van with a Coleman camp light strapped to my head studying for the Louisiana bar. I settled my score with the bar exam and made my way down to Nineveh.

But why? Why did I want to return to the law? Why do any of us do it? Why practice law? That is the question I pose.

I recall exactly when I was confronted with the “what” of it all. I was attending a middle school career day wherein the students were rotated quickly among adults, taking notes as they learned about various professions. It was closely akin to speed dating, except the students were seeking career advice. Of all the questions posed by the students, one stuck with me: “What do you do every day?” Pause and reflect on that. What *do* we do every day? And, again,

more importantly, WHY do we do it?

Among the many things that I learned from my mentor Wellborn Jack, Jr. was a methodology for eliciting witness testimony. Using the following prompts, you can ask questions all day: who, what, where, when, how, explain, describe and tell me.

Wellborn purposefully left “why” out of the initial set. As he explained, people typically loathe to discuss the “why” of any given situation. Unlike the other questions, asking “why” requires introspection because it addresses motive and intent.

That brings me back to the question: Why do we become lawyers?

During the summer of 2001, I attended a two-week trial practice seminar at Mercer School of Law in Macon, Georgia. I was surrounded by some of the best trial lawyers in the country, and we were immersed in the nuts and bolts of practicing law, and specifically, how to try criminal jury trials.

Of the approximately 150 participants, I was the only one whose practice was primarily focused on civil litigation. The rest were state or federal public defenders. Given their caseloads, many rarely had the opportunity to visit with their clients before their cases were called for trial. Yet when it came to their motives for becoming lawyers, the “why” was plainly obvious.

Given the great lengths we go to in order to pursue this extraordinary calling, what is the payoff we hope to achieve? Aside from increased earning potential, many cite prestige, intellectual challenge, family tradition, transferrable skills, flexibility and the opportunity to advocate for others as reasons why they became lawyers. Those of us fortunate enough to practice the art and science of this noble profession know that, as with most arguments, there are at least two sides to the story.

Although the practice of law offers tremendous upshots, there are also certain drawbacks. Among the pitfalls we must navigate are stress, long hours, alcohol and drug addiction, marital and family strife and ever-rising law school debt.

We’ve all heard someone quip that a person would make a good lawyer because they like to argue. In truth, however, a penchant for arguing will take you only so far. When bogged down in the minutiae of the day-to-day grind, the focus of the argument will be directed inward: WHY did I do this?

To this point, Judge Learned Hand observed: “It is the daily, it is the small; it is the cumulative injuries of little people that we are here to protect... If we are able to keep our democracy, there must be one commandment: Thou shalt not ration justice.”

According to Justice Benjamin Cardozo, “Membership in the bar is a privilege burdened with conditions.” And, the Notorious RBG encourages us to “Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you.” In that regard, Justice Ginsburg essentially took a page from my grandmother’s book: You attract more flies with honey than vinegar.

According to Clarence Darrow, “As long as the world shall last, there will be wrongs, and if no man objected and if no man rebelled, those wrongs would last forever.” I think he was onto something.

That said, many misinterpret the familiar quote from Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part 2*, when Dick the Butcher says, “The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers.” The truth of the matter is that those who seek to establish tyranny or chaos must first eliminate those who strive to uphold the rule of law. That’s where we step in.

Consider the following examples: *Gideon v. Wainwright* (establishing the right to counsel), *Miranda v. Arizona* (the right to re-

main silent), *Cooper v. Aaron* (Little Rock school desegregation), *Heart of Atlanta Hotel v. United States* (regarding public accommodations so people like me can stay in a place like Sandestin), *Palmer v. Thompson* (swimming pool integration), and *Loving v. Virginia* (permitting interracial marriage such as mine).

These are just a few examples. Lawyers have made a difference for humanity throughout time. I see no reason for that to change now.

In his seminal work *Toward a Psychology of Being*, noted psychologist Abraham Maslow addresses his theories of self-actualization and the hierarchy of human needs. Personally, I have found that I’m happiest and most fulfilled when I am satisfying the many facets of my life, be they personal, professional, or societal.

As an enterprising lawyer, it is easy to think that I can work a few more hours and get a little more done. But, at what cost? While we engage in empire building, we often sacrifice our families, our health, our hobbies and the very things that make us unique, special and whole. That should not be the case.

The benefits of regular exercise and eating better are well established and they speak for themselves. Carve out time for family and friends. Most of all, as selfish as it may seem, remember that everyone is better served when we save time for ourselves.

Now come on, preacher, bring it on home! It has been said that charity begins at home. In that regard, I am reminded of a theme Booker T. Washington incorporated into his 1895 speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta, Georgia.

Washington was charged with convincing the Northern visitors to the exposition that racial progress had been made in the South. Washington recounted a story of a lost ship in the Atlantic that sent out a distress signal. Those on the ship were dying of thirst and pleaded for drinkable water. A neighboring vessel signaled back, “Cast down your bucket where you are.” The crew concluded that they’d been misunderstood, surely, they couldn’t cast their buckets into the Atlantic Ocean and retrieve fresh, drinkable water. Again, they signaled the need for drinkable water. And, again, the same reply. This went on until the crew of the lost ship cast down its bucket, which returned filled with the fresh water that flowed from the Amazon River into the Atlantic Ocean.

Washington offered the story to suggest that those on both sides of the proverbial aisle should cast down their buckets among one another, building relationships that would benefit all involved. I offer the story for a similar, albeit somewhat nuanced purpose.

To my fellow lawyers, I encourage you to cast down your buckets within the LSBA. Give freely of your love, your time and your talents to our association and the larger community as a whole. It has been said that a joy shared is a joy doubled. For my part, I gave a few hours of my time to our Bar, and it returned a bounty unto me.

As our nation recently celebrated July Fourth and marked 250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, I’d like to close with a JFK quote. In a 1961 address to the National Industrial Conference Board, President Kennedy stated, “For I can assure you that we love our country, not for what it was, though it has always been great; not for what it is, though of this we are greatly proud; but, for what it someday can, and through the effort of us all, someday will be.”

This soaring rhetoric was meant to inspire and capture a soaring ideal.

I sincerely thank you for this opportunity to serve. And may God bless you all.

— Curtis, #86