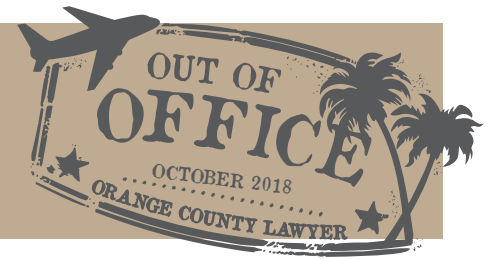




## OUT OF OFFICE

THE HONORABLE FRANCISCO F. FIRMAT



# The Most Important Word I Ever Read

I presided for many years over a user-friendly trial department in Superior Court and often chatted with lawyers during a lull in proceedings. Many litigators complained about their long hours, that they were close to burnout, and some even stated their marriages were in peril because of their work schedule. I would often tell counsel: “It’s easy to be seduced into working long hours by work that is interesting and well-paid.” I suggested they reduce their hours, take vacations, and have “speed-bumps” in the day such as a walk, meditation, a quick change of scenery to refresh the mind. I would remind them that people at their deathbed seldom say “I should have worked longer hours” and would point to an etched granite in my chambers that said, “It’s hard to sing or dance while carrying the piano.” We carry the piano of the legal profession so that we can sing and dance, and we must remember to put down the piano! Those words were my best wisdom.

Eight years ago my wife was hit by a car. She had a fractured right knee, a fractured left ankle, and the tibia and fibula in both legs were crushed into two dozen fragments. Forty-six days later, after surgeries, titanium rods, plates, screws, and skin grafts, she came home from the hospital to a wheelchair and painful rehabilitation. Today, she walks with a limp and with differing levels of daily pain. I retired from the bench and to private judging because she needed assistance at home.

Seven months after the accident, Laura took her first steps. That same week she placed a yellow Post-it note on the bathroom mirror with the word “Choose.” After it stayed for days, I asked her about the Post-it note. Her unforgettable reply was:

During the last seven months I’ve had time to think, and I’ve realized that I have squandered my life. I have reacted daily to what life threw my way instead of living the life I wanted to live. And I don’t want to live that way anymore. That Post-it note is a reminder that I daily want to do what is life-giving to other people; it’s a reminder that even though I have autumn on the outside of my body, I choose to carry an attitude of spring on the inside. Finally, it’s a reminder to live a life that is not reactive and burdened by the cynicism, conflict, and strife life may send my way. Instead, I want

whatever good there is in me to affect my world.

I am certain my jaw dropped at the wisdom of her statement.

The next day I placed a yellow Post-it note on the chambers bathroom mirror in Dept. C-15. Every day since then I’ve started my morning with a prayer that mimics her words:

On this day, I pray for the grace to be life-giving to the people I meet. (I then go over the names and faces of those I’m likely to encounter that day). On this day, I pray for the grace to carry an attitude of spring on the inside even though I carry autumn on the outside. On this day, I pray for the grace to not be reactive to the cynics, critics, naysayers, and distractions that could keep me from doing my best. Rather, I pray that whatever good there is in me will make an impact on the world.

During a period of seven months, my wife discovered the ancient wisdom of living with intentionality. If I were to give advice to an attorney or a judge today, I would add that they should write the word “Choose” on a yellow Post-it note as a reminder to live with intentionality. Place it on the bathroom mirror as a daily reminder and prayer, directive, or affirmation. Let “Choose” be your daily reminder to reach for what is important to you. Let “Choose” mean whatever you discern is the optimum way to live a life with meaning.



**The Honorable Francisco F. Firmat** retired from the Orange County Superior Court in 2013 after twenty-seven years

on the bench. Currently, he’s a private judge in Orange County at ADR Services, Inc.

*Out of Office is an occasional column in which authors share ways to make life meaningful and fulfilling, during and outside of the practice of law.]*

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