Is patience really a virtue?
By Kathy Morris*

We have all heard the proverbial phrase "patience is a virtue."
Contextualizing the dictionary definition of being patient to the practice of
law, patience could mean:

- bearing the trials of having a critical boss if what you are learning
  outweighs the inflicted pain;
- manifesting the forbearance to hold your tongue under the
  provocation of a demanding client;
- avoiding hasty decisions about how to handle a case or deal;
- remaining steadfast to a position you believe in despite the difficulty
  or adversity encountered from an opposing counsel.

These examples of patience do sound virtuous.

But the dictionary also provides a less desirable synonym for patient: long-
suffering.

And the "related words" it lists read far less virtuously:
acquiescence, resignation; passiveness, passivity; amenability, compliance, conformism, docility, obedience, subordination, tractability, willingness; discipline, self-control; submission, submissiveness.

Of that list, amenability, tractability, willingness, discipline, and self-control are neutral enough to pass muster as a virtue. But the rest are words that come with a price tag in the law that if not base or blameworthy are at best objectionable, near antonyms of virtuousness.

Does it prove a virtue to:

- acquiesce year after year to a lower compensation level than that of your workplace peers?
- resign yourself to the ongoing verbal abuse of a supervisor?
- show passivity when colleagues continue to get the plum opportunities?
- docilely and obediently comply with Friday afternoon deadlines when the partner never reads your work or responds to you until at least the following Wednesday?
- conform submissively to the bad habits of other lawyers, such as ignoring a good morning greeting from people you pass in the hallway?
- subordinate yourself to others in meetings to the point where your voice is never heard?

Not only are these not virtues, they are behaviors that can cause you great unhappiness, undermine your self-esteem and skill-building, and even lead to the loss of your job.

One of the main reasons lawyers fail--fail to be promoted, rewarded, or hired, whether by employers or prospective clients--is that they lack or are
perceived to lack confidence. It's critical that you balance even the more positive forms of patience with an active participation in your own career, and avoid those manifestations of patience that can be mistaken for lack of interest, enthusiasm, or commitment.

Unfortunately, all good things do not always come to he (or she) who waits. Patience may at times be a virtue, but it can also be a risk.

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