

The Tom Cruise Moment

I first saw the movie, 'A Few Good Men', when I was a young lawyer. I loved the film and its message that no-one is above the law. Many years later, I once again saw the film and it struck me how powerful it is in promoting social justice lawyering. In the final stages of the film, the camera focuses in on Tom Cruise, the quintessential rookie lawyer, bursting with talent and passion. Committed to justice against all odds, he dons his Navy Whites, enters the courtroom for the first time and stares down the personification of Evil that is Jack Nicholson and gets his confession: 'You're goddamn right I ordered the Code Red'. In the final scene, Tom Cruise looks around the now empty, sun-kissed mahogany courtroom; the music rises and Tom exits the court: Good versus Evil; the triumph of Law over Injustice.

Any young person watching that movie must, at that moment, inevitably know that they will become a lawyer. It is impossible not to be moved to the ambition of being that lawyer. But not just any lawyer; the Social Justice Lawyer; the lawyer who in his first few months after graduation wins the unwinnable victory, (and looks really good doing it); the lawyer who will have the tangible moment of knowing that they singlehandedly changed the world.

Every young social justice lawyer wants their *Tom Cruise* moment.

But is this Tom Cruise effect real? Social justice work is rarely, if ever, about the moment of the 'win'. It is about the gruelling, constant, detailed, unfulfilling and banal collection of evidence, production of paperwork, navigating the possibility of winning the case but losing the battle. It is some of the most difficult work, where we hardly ever see the fruits of our labour and, when we do, it may well be a win in court but very little changes for the individual client.

So how do we measure our success?

I recently had the privilege of engaging with a gathering of young social justice lawyers. One lawyer, newly graduated and deeply immersed in community lawyering, told me about her frustrations in social justice law. She lamented that in the six months in which she had been working, she had seen no change in the hardships faced by her clients. I was amazed: people have worked and died over centuries for the smallest change in law. Slavery, apartheid, equal pay, children's rights, environmental rights – the entire spectrum of rights and rights violations – have been pushed forward, inch by inch – the ever increasing burdensome boulder – by hundreds of social justice lawyers across generations. And yet here was a lawyer who expected change within six months.

She was right: the ambition, for all of us working in this field, should be an angry, impatient and absolute demand that our work realises change. We should not be complacent or satisfied with slow justice. But we should also remember that our role is never an isolated one; that we work within a network of hundreds of lawyers, across dozens of generations, who have inched forward some form of social justice, somewhere, at some time. This young lawyer, for example, could

never have practised law had it not been for a series of feminist lawyers preceding her and securing the rights of women to practice law.

We do social justice work because we want to know we've changed something for someone; because we battle against hardship and injustice. But if we demand this change as our measure of success, I fear we would all give up the fight.

Every lawyer wants their *Tom Cruise Moment*. Aspire to this, by all means, but *not* as the measurement of success as a social justice lawyer. The measurement of success is more likely to be the client who can tell her story to someone who will listen. Such victories take place in the private realm of those we serve and it is the views of our clients that must be the measurement for our success. Social justice work should never be about the person doing the work but about the person for whom one is doing the work.