

Interview Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg

July 17th, 2009

This afternoon, you met our students from the Law School. You told them that a good lawyer had to be aware of the law as much as possible, what other advice would you give them for being a good judge?

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg - In the United States, we don't have a judicial career, as you do in France. Before you get to be a judge, you have been a practicing lawyer, sometimes a law professor. My advice for being a good judge is to love what you do, to work very hard at it and if you are on a collegial court, sitting and making decisions with other judges, it is very important to be a good listener, to listen not only to advocates representing the parties in a case, but to your colleagues as well.

Other than what your husband, Pr. Ginsburg told them, what would you advise them to be good students?

RBG - To be good students, you must study hard, and you should enjoy reading. If you're a law student, you should enjoy arguing. Lawyers are in the business of persuasion. Law students should acquire skill in the art of persuasion. Lawyers and law students should also have a broader outlook: don't read things that concern the law exclusively - read good novels, good biographies, and histories.

In the United States and all over the world as well, you are famous for fighting against inequalities - I'm thinking about the book you co-wrote on inequalities based on sex matters. What do you think about what Sciences Po does to fight social inequalities?

RBG - I think it's tremendously important because we live in a diverse society and people must learn to live with each other, to understand each other, to appreciate our differences; but also to pull together for the common good, for the good of the society.

How do you think we have to go further on those matters?

RBG - It's not an easy matter. For one thing, there is in the United States as there is in France, and in Paris, a high degree of segregation by neighborhoods, in where people live. So schools are the places where children can come to together. But it takes an effort like the one Sciences Po is engaged in to see that all the students are not cut from the same mold, that there are people from different backgrounds who can live together, learn together, and enhance each other's understanding of different cultures.

Proust questionnaire - What is your favorite virtue?

RBG - Well, I would say integrity, honesty. Another is one I would call caring... genuinely caring for other people who live in your society. That's what I advise young lawyers and law students. You will not be much different from a tradesman or skilled artisan -- a shoemaker, baker, or butcher -- unless you use what you have learned in Law School to help make your society a little better. So, use your talent to work for the public good.

What do you appreciate the most in your friends?

RBG - What I appreciate the most in my friends... Caring for each other, being supportive of each other, being sensitive to each other's needs and concerns. There's a word that our president, President Obama, uses, and I think it's a good one: empathy. Being as the French would say "sympathique".

What is your idea of happiness?

RBG - To have a satisfying work life and home life. If you can have those two, then you really have it all.

If not yourself, who would you be?

RBG - Oh, that's easy, I would be a great Diva. I would be Maria Callas. Or perhaps Joan Sutherland. Or Renata Tebaldi.

Who is your favorite composer?

RBG - Mozart.

Your favorite hero?

RBG - It's hard to pick just one. On the judging side, I would pick the fourth Chief Justice of the United States, Justice John Marshall. And one of my heroes is a woman I just visited in Italy, in Rome two days ago. Her name is Rita Levi-Montalcini, she is now one hundred years and two months old. She won the Nobel Prize in the late 1980s. She's truly a great lady.

What is the reform you admire the most?

RBG - A great change came about in the United States after the Civil War, when slavery ended. The vibrant ideas at the time of the Revolution in France were liberty, equality, fraternity. The United States could not put equality in its Constitution originally in 1787, because southern states still had slavery. But after the Civil War, we enshrined in our Constitution the equality ideal.

What is your present state of mind?

RBG - Contented... Felice, the Italians would say. I feel very happy to be in this most beautiful of all cities.

Last but not least, what would be your favorite motto?

RBG - The motto of the United States is "E pluribus unum" - that means of many, one. And that is my dream for my country, your country, and the world. That we are many people, different races, different cultures, but we can come together as one for the good of our Earth, our planet.