

Looking for a Patriotic Boost? Try Jury Duty.

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The juror summons letter explained that a warrant would be issued for my arrest if I failed to show up. But if I did show up, the letter added, lunch would be provided.

Three weeks later, I arrived at the county courthouse, properly attired, with a photo ID, and anxiously awaiting my hoagie. I was surrounded by 40 or so of my peers—all of us crammed into the courtroom as the prosecutor and defense attorney attempted to cull our numbers to the necessary 12. While I prayed I would not be one of them, I was reminded of the words of comedian Norm Crosby: “When you go into court, you are putting your fate into the hands of twelve people who weren’t smart enough to get out of jury duty.”

This is precisely the kind of thinking that ensured that I was selected myself.

When my number was called, I made the long, slow march to the jury box. Once we were seated, we went through the agonizing task of determining if we knew our fellow jurors. Given the size of our relatively small city, it quickly devolved into a reunion. It seemed like everyone knew someone, and no fewer than a third of the jurors knew me.

“Let the record show,” the judge said wearily, “that everyone seems to know B.J.”

“It’s great to be here!” I may or may not have said with the enthusiasm of a low-level local celebrity.

As jury selection began solidifying, I began working overtime to devise some strategy to avoid my civic duty. If only I could conjure the proper excuse, I reasoned, they’d have to set me free.

“Is there any reason why any of you can’t serve on this jury?” the judge asked.

I suspected my reason wouldn’t fly in the courtroom. After four devastatingly difficult years of writing and research, I’d at last published a book on President John F. Kennedy—one due to be released, along with an accompanying reading, at 6 p.m. that evening. The event had been planned for months, and the notion of missing it—being sequestered in some deliberations room while the book release attendees wondered what hardship had befallen the author—was too much to bear. It wasn’t just about ego; there was a financial cost, too. This was just one of a handful of readings I’d been forced to reschedule upon receiving my juror summons letter. Any potential fruits of my labor, it seemed, were quickly spoiling.

As I stewed in the jury box, I was reminded of the most memorable line President Kennedy ever said. “Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.”

(Wise words from a man who never saw the inside of a jury box, and whose father bought the bulk of his books.)

But then, something changed. As I raised my right hand and took the Juror’s oath—affirming my commitment to a fair and impartial process—I joined 65,000 of my peers who, in Wisconsin, are annually summoned to the courthouse to serve as jurors. All personal concerns subsided. Who cared about some book release when democracy seemed at stake?

Glancing to my left and right, I noticed a similar sense of duty had taken hold of my fellow jurors. We were humbled by the enormity of the task before us—one which none of us had asked for (and some of us had actively tried to avoid), but which we now viewed as a sacred charge.

Over the next seven hours, my fellow jurors and I listened to testimony, examined evidence, and penned pages of notes on our legal pads. While reality TV shows like 2023's *Jury Duty* had led me to believe that courtrooms were contentious at their best and circuses at their worst, this courtroom was neither. I'd expected more gaveling, more calls to "Quit badgering the witness." But no one badgered anyone, and I have no memory of a gavel at all.

The real-life courtroom would have made for terrible TV. It lacked drama and comedy. Instead, decency and decorum ruled the day.

At my peers' suggestion, I agreed to be the foreperson—not begrudgingly but with a reverence that surprised me. Perhaps some part of me wanted to do it. I knew the task ahead seemed perilous (when was the last time 12 Americans agreed on anything?), yet I believed we could find our way through. I needed to believe that.

Seated in the deliberations room, I heard Kennedy whispering in my ear for a second time, this time reminding me that Americans strive to do difficult things—say, land on the moon or reach a courtroom consensus—"not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

Out of respect for the sanctity of the deliberations room, I'll share nothing of what transpired there. Except to say that each of my fellow jurors was earnest and forthright, honest, and fair. We were our own microcosmic melting pot, and we were stronger for it. We listened to one another and heard one another in a manner that seems rare in modern America.

Yet, it is not rare. Every day, juries like ours gather across the country and find their way through. They take their oath, talk it out, and often reach a consensus.

We reached our consensus the day after my reading (which I did make, you'll be glad to know). As we left the deliberations room, we held our heads high. Even when we'd doubted ourselves, we trusted our communal wisdom. Our verdict was our verdict. Both pragmatically and metaphorically, we could never have reached it alone.

When our job was done, our cell phones were returned to us. I glanced at the screen and was overwhelmed by a flood of texts and emails. Immediately, I missed the silence of our sacred duty. And I missed dedicating myself fully to a cause far greater than myself. But mostly, I missed sharing such vital work alongside 12 near strangers who, despite our differences, were wholly committed to the cause.

A part of me wanted to wave a flag, sing the anthem, and kiss a bald eagle straight on the beak. Jury duty showed me the America I'd been yearning for—the one that needed us all.

"We should do this again sometime," I joked to my fellow jurors as we made our way to our cars.

We laughed, we waved, we went our separate ways.

The hoagie was only half the reward.

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