

**Book Review of *A Path in the Law*
by Judge Robert A. Satter**

Reviewed by Wick Chambers*

Having spent his entire working life as a practicing lawyer, legislator, legislative counsel and judge, Judge Satter has a unique and valuable perspective on living a life "in the law" with an emphasis on public service. He skillfully shares that perspective in his inspiring and heartening autobiography, *A Path in the Law* (The Connecticut Law Book Company, Guilford, CT 06437 203-458-8000, 378 pages, paperback \$12.00 plus tax and shipping).

He began his career in New York where he learned the lesson that surprises and sometimes disappoints young lawyers. As a Judge told him, "... more important than being right in the practice of law is being practical." That was good advice but Satter did not always follow it in deciding what to do with his life. After struggling through the frustrations and self doubt that haunt young lawyers as they try to acquire lawyering skills, Satter was on his way to financial security but was deeply unhappy. As an associate he disliked being told what to do and how to do it, and felt that "if I stayed here for 50 years I would never make a difference. I had to get out." With the loving support and encouragement of his wife Ruth, Satter did get out. Despite the financial and professional risk, he moved his young family to Hartford, Connecticut to start a small general practice with his college friend George Ritter.

Ritter & Satter was formed on the basis of a deep friendship, a shared liberal democratic idealism and a commitment to public service. The firm struggled, prospered and after nine years failed. Starting off as equal partners, they eventually could not agree on who was entitled to what for what. Ritter, heavily involved in politics and well known in the community, was the rainmaker while Satter did most of the legal work. The story of the firm will be instructive to law students and new lawyers many of whom will undoubtedly be confronted with similar issues sooner or later.

The variety of work that Satter did as a lawyer was astonishing, perhaps even by the standards of the 1950s and 60s: personal injury, public offerings, commercial real estate, criminal law, family law, estate planning, zoning, labor law, drafting legislation, and a variety of trial work all the way from the local court of common pleas to the United States Supreme Court. Clients ranged from the very poor to the very rich, from communists to the State legislature, and from convicted murderers to a fantastically wealthy real estate investor, who, as Satter writes, "made me rich."

The stories focus not only on legal issues but also on the lives of the people involved. They teach about the law and give the reader a good feel for what it is like to practice law: the excitement, the uncertainty, the impact on one's family both good and bad, the sense of responsibility for helping other people, the rich unpredictability of it all.

There are many useful insights for young lawyers. On counseling divorce clients: "... my style was to be available, to listen intently, and, along with legal

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advice, to convey respect and assurance." On trial work: "Occasionally, I came painfully to learn, the toughest adversary was not the opposing attorney but the trial judge." Satter's stories about the matters he handled are instructive and well told. He recounts wins and loses, including malpractice in connection with a public offering. This is not one long pat on the back by any means. It is a sharing of one's experiences in the hope that they will be interesting and useful to others.

One of the reasons Satter left New York was a desire to make a difference. He did. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in his representation of two convicted murderers, one sentenced to life without parole, the other to death. In each instance the representation began after the men were convicted. His and his family's involvement with the men spanned thirty-five years. In the death case Satter became involved through the efforts of William Styron and George Will, then a college student, who were campaigning to save the life of the condemned man. Remarkably, and in one case due in no small measure to the role played by Satter's daughter Mimi, both men were eventually pardoned and readmitted to society, albeit with vastly differing results.

Satter found service as a State Representative the most fulfilling of his roles in the law. Some of the most interesting chapters in the book are about the electoral process and legislative life. Incredibly he won two elections each by a margin of a single vote. He describes the political process from campaigning door to door, frequently with one of his children in tow, to arguments on the floor of the House, to logrolling, to back room deals brokered by the legendary State Democratic Party Chairman, John M. Bailey. One gets a sense of what legislative life is like, the excitement, the boredom, the chaos, the dealmaking and the camaraderie.

While lawyers, perhaps especially young ones, are likely to enjoy and benefit from this book, it is by no means written just for lawyers. It is a collection of stories about people as much as it is about the law. It is part history with vivid accounts of the Depression, World War II, and the McCarthy era as well as of Connecticut politics in the 1960s. It is also in part a story about the Satter family, never far removed from his life in the law, although there is a telling account of behavior by one of his children that angered Satter. Ruth explained the reason for it: the child was angry because Satter had not been paying enough attention to him. That was an aberration but there is no denying the tension between one's responsibilities as a lawyer and as a parent. In part the book is also a love story about the relationship between Satter and his first wife, Ruth. Clearly she was a remarkable woman, wise, independent, honest, kind and brave. Theirs was a special partnership that lasted through it all. Satter's intimate account of her dying and death from leukemia is moving and unforgettable.

One of the reasons Satter left New York forty-four years ago was in the hope that he would make a difference. He has done that many times as a lawyer, legislator and Judge. With this book he has done it as a writer.