

Filed June 26, 2019

STATE BAR COURT OF CALIFORNIA

REVIEW DEPARTMENT

In the Matter of)	Nos. 17-N-07479; 18-O-10432
)	(Consolidated)
RAYMOND THOMAS LEE III,)	
)	OPINION AND ORDER
State Bar No. 206308.)	
_____)	

Prior to the trial of this consolidated disciplinary proceeding, Raymond Thomas Lee III stipulated to all of the facts which support the two charges currently against him. Those charges are that he (1) willfully violated rule 9.20(c), California Rules of Court¹, by filing over three months late, his required proof of compliance ordered by the Supreme Court in Lee’s prior discipline; and (2) willfully violated section 6068, subdivision (k),² Business and Professions Code, by failing to comply timely with Supreme Court-ordered disciplinary probation in two respects.

At trial, Lee admitted that the State Bar Office of Probation (Probation) staff timely sent him correct compliance information that was readily available to him as email messages and status updates on his attorney listing on the State Bar’s website. He also conceded that he had failed to do what he should have done: to monitor regularly the expected issuance of a Supreme Court order requiring his rule 9.20 and probation compliance, and to follow through with timely compliance. Further, Lee testified that he did not open or read the information which the State

¹ All further references to rules are to this source, unless otherwise noted.

² All further references to sections are to this source, unless otherwise noted.

Bar had sent, until over three months after the earliest State Bar communications. He urged that his own failure to timely read these communications deprived him of actual knowledge of his compliance deadlines; and therefore, he did not willfully fail to comply with rule 9.20 or his probation duties.

In his decision recommending Lee's disbarment, the hearing judge rejected Lee's claim of lack of willfulness as unsupported, citing well-established decisional law fixing the test of willfulness in rule 9.20 and probation compliance matters below the standard advocated by Lee. Finding that aggravating circumstances outweighed those of mitigation, and noting that the typical degree of discipline for just a willful violation of rule 9.20 is disbarment, the hearing judge recommended it as the aggregate discipline for all of Lee's violations.

In Lee's appeal to us, he repeats his view that his conduct was not willful; and, in the alternative, that his mitigating evidence collectively deserves a sanction less than disbarment. The Office of Chief Trial Counsel of the State Bar (OCTC) argues that the hearing judge's findings and conclusions of Lee's culpability are fully supported as is the disbarment recommendation.

After independently reviewing the record (rule 9.12), we uphold the hearing judge's findings, conclusions, and his recommendation of disbarment.

I. BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

In 1983, Lee was licensed as an attorney in Ohio; and in 2000, he also became licensed in California.

On January 14, 2016, the Supreme Court of Ohio imposed an indefinite suspension of Lee's Ohio law license based on his culpability for violating six ethical standards in representing a Kentucky teacher in defense of proceedings before the Kentucky Education Professional Standards Board, and for violating ethical standards in failing to timely respond to the Ohio

disciplinary investigation. Lee's misconduct was serious. It involved his protracted, repeated failure to provide legal services to his teacher-client while leading the client to believe that he was protecting her interests. It also included his concealment of material facts from his client. Lee's misconduct caused his client great difficulty in getting her teaching certificate reinstated and caused her emotional distress. Although the client's subsequent counsel was able to obtain reinstatement of her teaching certificate, she has expressed the view that she may never return to teaching again.

As a result of Lee's Ohio discipline, he became subject to disciplinary proceedings before our Hearing Department. (§ 6049.1; Rules Proc. of State Bar, rules 5.350–5.354; see, e.g., *In the Matter of Kauffman* (Review Dept. 2001) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 213, 216–217.) On January 17, 2017, the proceeding commenced; and, at the pretrial phase, Lee and OCTC entered into a comprehensive stipulation of facts and disposition of that proceeding.³ This included Lee's agreement to accept as discipline in California, a two-year stayed suspension on conditions of specific probationary duties, including: six months' actual suspension; contacting Probation, within 30 days of the effective date of discipline, to schedule a meeting with Lee's assigned probation deputy; and submitting the first quarterly written reports to Probation by January 10, 2018, attesting to his compliance with probationary terms.

Lee was also required to comply with the provisions of rule 9.20 to report his compliance with the rule to the State Bar court clerk within 40 days of the effective date of the Supreme Court's order.

³ In the Hearing Department, Lee and OCTC had stipulated that Lee's Ohio discipline as to his Kentucky client rested on the following ethical violations: failing to reasonably communicate with his client, repeatedly failing to perform legal services competently, engaging in dishonesty or misrepresentation, abandoning his client, failing to release the client's file to her, failing to cooperate with State Bar investigation, and practicing law in another jurisdiction (Kentucky) without complying with its rules for regulating the legal profession.

Effective October 1, 2017, the Supreme Court ordered Lee disciplined with all of the duties agreed to by Lee and OCTC in the stipulated disposition. (Supr. Ct. order in S242412, State Bar Court No. 16-J-13611.)

The current proceedings started on March 19, 2018, when OCTC filed its Notice of Disciplinary Charges (NDC), alleging that Lee failed to timely comply with rule 9.20(c), and with two conditions of his probation: timely contacting Probation by October 31, 2017, to schedule a meeting with Lee's assigned probation deputy; and timely submitting the first of his quarterly written probation reports, due January 10, 2018.

Before trial, Lee and OCTC filed a comprehensive factual stipulation admitting to all facts alleged in the NDC (Stipulation). This left for trial the only remaining disputed issues of whether Lee's violations were willful; and, if so, the degree of discipline to recommend. After a one-day trial in which Lee testified, the hearing judge found that he willfully violated rule 9.20(c) and two of his probation conditions. Concluding that aggravating circumstances outweighed mitigating ones, the hearing judge recommended Lee's disbarment.

II. LEE'S STIPULATION, TRIAL EVIDENCE, AND SETTLED LAW CONCLUSIVELY ESTABLISHED HIS WILLFUL VIOLATION OF RULE 9.20(C) AND OF TWO OF HIS PROBATION DUTIES

A. LEE IS CULPABLE OF WILLFULLY VIOLATING RULE 9.20(C)

It is undisputed that Lee was fully aware of the compliance duties he had agreed to in his Stipulation. He admitted that he had read the entire Stipulation before he signed it.

On September 20, 2017, Probation informed Lee that the Supreme Court had ordered his suspension per the Stipulation. It also notified Lee of applicable compliance deadlines, including that Lee's rule 9.20(c) compliance affidavit was to be filed no later than November 10, 2017. Probation posted this information on Lee's attorney profile on the State Bar's website. It also

sent Lee an email on September 20, 2017, addressed to his official State Bar address, notifying him that the compliance information was posted to his attorney profile on the Bar website.⁴

When it appeared that Lee had not timely reported his rule 9.20 compliance, on November 16, 2017, Probation sent him both a mailed letter and an email notice that he was delinquent in performing this duty.

Lee did not comply with rule 9.20(c) until February 21, 2018, more than three months after the due date.

Lee admitted below that the Bar staff was “up-front” with him and he had only himself to blame for not having opened his email messages or looked at his State Bar profile in a timely manner. Lee testified that he did not open Probation’s letter or email messages to him about his probation compliance dates until January 11, 2018. Lee gave two reasons for this conduct—that he wanted to take a break from law practice since he knew that he would be under some actual suspension in California and was under continuing suspension in Ohio. He also cited the weight of his emotional problems, which we discuss in more detail *post*.

Lee also urged that his delay in compliance did not rise to a willful violation, testifying that he did not have the “actual knowledge” of the due date of his rule 9.20 compliance until after the deadline had passed. At trial, Lee relied on *People v. Garcia* (2001) 25 Cal.4th 744, and he read that case to require actual knowledge of the duty to act, in order to find a willful violation of rule 9.20.⁵

⁴ Not only did Lee stipulate to these facts, he introduced evidence that the email messages which Probation sent were received into his email program log on the dates that they were sent.

⁵ *People v. Garcia, supra*, affirmed a criminal felony conviction of failure to register as a sex offender per a registration order in a prior conviction. (Pen. Code, § 290, subds. (a)(1), (g)(2).) In that criminal prosecution, the Supreme Court held that an element of willfulness was the defendant’s actual knowledge that he was required to register. (*People v. Garcia, supra*, 25 Cal.4th at p. 752.)

OCTC disputed the correctness of Lee relying on *Garcia* as authority for the definition of willfulness under rule 9.20, citing *Powers v. State Bar* (1988) 44 Cal.3d 337, 341–342. In that case, and others, the Supreme Court specifically held that for purposes of the predecessor of rule 9.20, rule 955,⁶ willfulness neither requires bad faith nor even actual knowledge of the provision violated. (See also *Lydon v. State Bar* (1988) 45 Cal.3d 1181, 1185–1186; *Hamilton v. State Bar* (1979) 23 Cal.3d 868, 873–874.) As in *Powers*, Lee has not disputed that all required notices were given in accordance with procedural rules, and he stipulated to those facts.

The hearing judge agreed with OCTC and found Lee’s failure to comply willful. On appeal, Lee repeats his rejected argument below, based on *Garcia*, that his rule 9.20(c) violation was not willful. We reject Lee’s argument and uphold the hearing judge’s conclusion that Lee’s rule 9.20 violation was willful.

We see three reasons for distinguishing Lee’s reliance on *Garcia*. First, *Garcia* was a criminal prosecution and this disciplinary proceeding is not. (E.g., *Giovanazzi v. State Bar* (1980) 28 Cal.3d 465, 472, citing *Lewis v. State Bar* (1973) 9 Cal.3d 704, 713–714.) Second, the Supreme Court noted in the *Garcia* case that different willfulness definitions applied in different proceedings and has established in several opinions, cited *ante* in *Lydon v. State Bar* and *Hamilton v. State Bar*, that the more general intent standard followed by the hearing judge is the applicable test of willfulness in this rule 9.20 proceeding. Finally, even if, *arguendo*, a knowledge of the “duty to act” standard akin to that in *Garcia* were to apply here, it would not avail Lee, since he admitted that he (1) read the Stipulation leading to his rule 9.20 and probation compliance duties, (2) was aware of what he was required to do once a final disciplinary order

⁶ There is no substantial difference between the provisions of former rule 955(c) and current rule 9.20(c).

issued, and (3) was timely notified of those specific duties and their time limits, once the Supreme Court order was filed imposing those duties.

In these circumstances, Lee must bear the responsibility for not having timely opened his mail and his email messages or consulted his State Bar profile. We agree with OCTC that, at the least, Lee demonstrated “willful blindness” to the obligations he had agreed to and knew that he would have to fulfill. (See *In the Matter of Carver* (Review Dept. 2016) 5 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 427, 432–433.)

Requiring an “actual knowledge” standard, as defined by Lee, could only encourage an attorney subject to rule 9.20 to do exactly what Lee did: ignore the duties and compliance deadlines by not timely reading relevant communications sent by Probation or other readily available information. As a result, rule 9.20’s intended protection of the public, courts, and legal profession could be sharply diluted in cases of attorneys’ actual suspensions from practice.

B. LEE IS CULPABLE OF WILLFULLY VIOLATING TWO OF HIS PROBATION CONDITIONS AS PROSCRIBED BY SECTION 6068, SUBDIVISION (K)

In his pretrial Stipulation, Lee agreed that on September 20, 2017, Probation informed him that the Supreme Court had ordered his suspension. Concurrent with notifying Lee of his rule 9.20 duties, Probation also notified him of applicable probation compliance deadlines. Probation did so by posting this information on Lee’s attorney profile on the State Bar’s website. It also sent Lee an email on September 20, 2017, addressed to his official State Bar address, notifying him that the reminder information of his compliance was posted to his attorney profile on the Bar website.

By October 31, 2017, Lee was required to schedule a meeting with his assigned Probation deputy. By January 10, 2018, he was required to file his first quarterly probation report. Lee did not timely comply with either of these probation duties.

On November 16, 2017, Probation sent Lee a mailed letter and an email notice that he was delinquent in his duty to contact Probation to schedule a meeting with his Probation deputy, and further reminding him that his first probation report was due by January 10, 2018.

Lee did not schedule a meeting with his Probation deputy until February 21, 2018, nearly four months later than required, and he filed his first quarterly probation report also on February 21, 2018, about six weeks after it was due.

While admitting all operative facts of his probation delinquencies, Lee asserted the same defense of lack of willfulness he had asserted as to his rule 9.20 compliance, also citing *People v. Garcia, supra*, 25 Cal.4th 744. This defense was rejected at trial by the hearing judge based on authority directly on point in probation revocation matters, that willfulness does not require proof of the probationer's actual knowledge of the specifics of the delinquencies. (*In the Matter of Taggart* (Review Dept. 2001) 4 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 302, 309.)

On appeal, Lee repeats this rejected argument below, based on *Garcia*. For the same reasons that we rejected Lee's argument as to his untimely compliance with rule 9.20 (see *ante*), we reject Lee's present argument here and uphold the hearing judge's conclusion that Lee's probation delinquencies were willful.

III. SIGNIFICANT AGGRAVATION OUTWEIGHS LIMITED MITIGATION

A. AGGRAVATING CIRCUMSTANCES

In the process of recommending the appropriate degree of discipline, OCTC must establish aggravating circumstances by clear and convincing evidence (std. 1.5), and Lee has the same burden to prove mitigation (std. 1.6).

The hearing judge accorded significant aggravating weight to Lee's prior record of discipline (std. 1.5(a)), and an unspecified weight to the aggravating circumstance of multiple acts of misconduct. (Std. 1.5(b).) We agree with the hearing judge as to Lee's prior disciplinary

record, as it revealed very serious misconduct, and find that moderate weight in aggravation is warranted for Lee's culpability of multiple acts of misconduct.

Lee's prior suspension was not only a significant factor in aggravation, it was related to the nature of his offenses in the current proceeding. In Lee's previous suspension, he was found culpable, by his stipulation, of failing, inter alia, to reasonably communicate with his client, and to render legal services to her, leading her to believe that he was protecting her interests when he was not. In the current matter, Lee has failed to comply with his own duties to the Supreme Court under rule 9.20; and, in two instances, to timely comply with probation duties.

For the same reason, we accord moderate weight in aggravation to Lee's culpability for multiple acts. Those acts demonstrate that even in the early days of his probation and duties to the Supreme Court and Probation, Lee was unable to perform them with any reasonable timeliness.

On review, OCTC asks us to find a third aggravating factor: his lack of insight and refusal to accept responsibility for his stipulated misconduct. (Std. 1.5(k).) Considering the one relevant ground which OCTC advances, Lee's stipulation to all operative facts while persisting in a meritless defense based on inapt case law, we find that the better course to adopt is that of the hearing judge: to utilize Lee's defense as a ground to reduce the mitigating weight surrounding his comprehensive stipulation of facts. Therefore, we shall adopt that approach, *post*, in lieu of also finding that Lee's willfulness defense was an aggravating circumstance.

B. MITIGATING CIRCUMSTANCES

OCTC appears to misread the hearing judge's decision in arguing that Lee's entry into a comprehensive stipulation before trial was not entitled to "moderate" mitigating weight accorded by the hearing judge, and should be given only nominal mitigation. We read the hearing judge's decision as having accorded only "some" mitigation to this factor, which the hearing judge

reduced further by Lee's denial of culpability, despite his complete factual stipulation. In any case, we agree with OCTC that Lee is entitled only to nominal mitigation by his stipulation and deem that this is consistent with how the hearing judge weighed Lee's extent of cooperation, assessed in full. (Std. 1.6(e) [spontaneous candor and cooperation with State Bar is mitigating].)

Lee's evidence of good character and pro bono and community service rests on seven letters—several from attorneys and one from his spouse, also an attorney. The hearing judge considered these references as worthy of moderate weight in mitigation. Lee contends that they are worth more weight, and OCTC contends that this evidence warrants less than moderate weight. We agree with OCTC's view of this evidence and collectively accord it modest weight. As the hearing judge found, the evidence was from limited sources and not, as required by standard 1.6(f), from a "wide range of references in the legal and general communities, who are aware of the full extent of the misconduct."

Of greater concern to us is that the evidence of Lee's character and service offers little insight to specifics of his *recent* ability to have handled legal matters or responsibilities in a positive manner. Most of the citations of Lee's positive character and community contributions are to actions in the significant past. Only a few references recite awareness that Lee faces discipline for probation violations, without acknowledging that his rule 9.20 violation was a failure to comply with a requirement ordered independently by the Supreme Court.

Looking at Lee's character and community service evidence in the aggregate, we can afford it only modest weight in mitigation.

Finally, we come to Lee's claim that he suffered extreme emotional difficulties, which entitles him to significant mitigation. Standard 1.6(d) sets forth three elements in order to assign mitigation for extreme emotional difficulties. Lee must show that: (1) he suffered from them as

of the time of his misconduct; (2) they are established by expert testimony as directly responsible for his misconduct; and (3) they no longer pose a risk that Lee will commit future misconduct.

Lee presented the telephonic testimony of Don Allen, Ph.D., an Ohio clinical social worker with training in psychological and marriage counseling. Allen had treated Lee first between July 2014 and April 2015. His diagnosis of Lee was depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Allen determined that Lee's symptoms are long-standing, arising from childhood, but they had lessened and had become minor, when compared to having seen him in 2014-2015. However, Allen's 2018 pre-testimonial report and his testimony show that Allen considers his diagnosis of Lee to remain applicable as late as mid-2018. In his written reports, part of the record of this proceeding, Allen recited the specific evidence he relied on to conclude that in all likelihood, Lee's condition played a role in his inability to perform his tasks in a timely manner, and Lee's inactions were consistent with Allen's diagnosis.⁷

Allen testified further that, compared to 2014-2015, Lee has made good, steady progress toward the ability to conduct a law practice; but Allen was also clear that Lee had not completed therapy needs as Lee's condition needed further treatment sessions with Allen. Allen had also recommended that Lee consult with a physician in order to start a medication regimen to address his depression, but Lee had not started such a program as of the hearing below. Lee ceased visits with Allen until March 2018 when he resumed seeing Allen about weekly.

Although OCTC disputes that the expert evidence establishes the second element listed *ante* of a nexus between Lee's diagnosis and his misconduct, we find that the proof establishes it.

⁷ Allen's report of the history and effect of Lee's condition in 2018 cites to these specific incidents which occurred in prior years: Lee's failure to take the simple steps and effort needed to complete a study course to be eligible for promotion to the rank of Marine colonel; his going to his law office at times for up to eight to ten hours, without being able to account for the time spent, or for having accomplished any significant tasks; his need to re-read paragraphs, losing touch with the task at hand as well as inability to define the task at hand which caused him to spend time at his office; and his inability to complete his tax returns in a timely fashion.

However, for the reasons we set forth *post*, we uphold the hearing judge's finding, also supported by OCTC, that the risk of future misconduct is likely, thus warranting no mitigating credit for Lee's showing.

Based on this evidence, the hearing judge found that Lee did not sustain his burden to prove mitigation under standard 1.6(d) because he had not recovered from his emotional conditions. Lee disagrees, contending that his recovery is evidenced by his active defense of these proceedings without succumbing to stress effects. Lee's argument is not sufficient to sustain his burden. Giving great weight to the hearing judge's decision as he saw and heard Lee, heard Allen by telephone, and weighed the testimony (Rules Proc. of State Bar, rule 5.155(A) [great weight given to hearing judge's findings of fact]; *McKnight v. State Bar* (1991) 53 Cal.3d 1025, 1032), and on our independent review, we uphold the hearing judge's decision.

Viewing the aggravating and mitigating circumstances together, we find that the weight properly accorded the aggravating ones preponderate over the nominal weight to be given mitigating circumstances.

IV. DISBARMENT IS THE APPROPRIATE DISCIPLINE

It is well-settled that the purpose of attorney discipline is not punishment, but the protection of the public, the courts and the legal profession, the maintenance of high professional standards, and the preservation of public confidence in the legal profession. (Std. 1.1; *Borré v. State Bar* (1991) 52 Cal.3d 1047, 1053; *Chadwick v. State Bar* (1989) 49 Cal.3d 103, 111.)

A willful violation of rule 9.20 is deemed to be a serious ethical offense for which disbarment is generally considered the appropriate discipline. (*Bercovich v. State Bar* (1990)

50 Cal.3d 116, 131.)⁸ In selecting the apt degree of discipline, each case should be decided on its own facts, after a balanced consideration of all relevant factors. (*Connor v. State Bar* (1990) 50 Cal.3d 1047, 1059.)

Although Lee points to his conduct as being more in line with that in *Durbin v. State Bar* (1979) 23 Cal.3d 461, and less than that in *Bercovich v. State Bar, supra*, 50 Cal. 3d 116, he has not dealt with the important former rule 955 case of *Lydon v. State Bar, supra*, 45 Cal.3d 1181, 1187. There, the Supreme Court observed that “Nothing on the face of rule [9.20] or in our prior practice distinguishes between ‘substantial’ and ‘insubstantial’ violations of rule [9.20].” Like the Supreme Court, we take a strict view of rule 9.20 violations because of the rule’s “critical prophylactic function” in notifying clients, counsel, adverse parties and the courts that an attorney is actually suspended from practice. (*Ibid.*) Further, the Supreme Court expressly noted in the portion of *Bercovich v. State Bar, supra*, 50 Cal. 3d 116 at p. 132, which Lee quoted in his brief that disbarment is the most consistently imposed sanction in recent post-standards cases under rule 9.20, and that greater consistency in imposing discipline was a key reason for the adoption of the standards.

On occasion, lesser discipline than disbarment has been imposed where the late filing of a compliance affidavit was the only rule 9.20 issue *and* the attorney demonstrated good faith, significant mitigation, and little or no aggravation.⁹ For example, an actual suspension is appropriate where an attorney makes an unsuccessful attempt to timely comply and presents substantial mitigation including recovery from extreme emotional difficulties (*Shapiro v. State*

⁸ As rule 9.20(d) provides, “A suspended [attorney’s] willful failure to comply with the provisions of this rule is a cause for disbarment or suspension and for revocation of any pending probation.”

⁹ See *Shapiro v. State Bar* (1990) 51 Cal.3d 251; *Durbin v. State Bar* (1979) 23 Cal.3d 461; *In the Matter of Rose* (Review Dept. 1994) 3 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 192; *In the Matter of Friedman* (Review Dept. 1993) 2 Cal. State Bar Ct. Rptr. 527.

Bar, supra, 51 Cal.3d at pp. 255–260). Such is not the case here as there is only nominal mitigation and serious aggravation due to several factors, including that Lee’s belated rule 9.20 compliance was both inexcusable and over three months late and that it was accompanied by two untimely probation compliance failures. Though stipulating to all of the facts supporting his untimely compliance, Lee has clung to a defense of lack of willfulness which is supported by neither his admitted facts nor relevant law. Moreover, the expert evidence shows he is a continued risk to the public because the effects of his diagnosis have not been fully treated as his own therapist has recommended.

V. RECOMMENDATION

We recommend that Raymond Thomas Lee III be disbarred from the practice of law and that his name be stricken from the roll of attorneys admitted to practice in California.

We further recommend that Lee be ordered to comply with the requirements of California Rules of Court, rule 9.20, and to perform the acts specified in subdivisions (a) and (c) of that rule within 30 and 40 days, respectively, after the effective date of the Supreme Court order imposing discipline in this matter.¹⁰

We further recommend that costs be awarded to the State Bar in accordance with section 6086.10, such costs being enforceable as provided in section 6140.7 and as a money judgment.

¹⁰ For purposes of compliance with rule 9.20(a), the operative date for identification of “clients being represented in pending matters” and others to be notified is the filing date of the Supreme Court order, not any later “effective” date of the order. (*Athearn v. State Bar* (1982) 32 Cal.3d 38, 45.) Further, the attorney is required to file a rule 9.20(c) affidavit even if he or she has no clients to notify on the date the Supreme Court filed its order in this proceeding. (*Powers v. State Bar* (1988) 44 Cal.3d 337, 341.) In addition to being punished as a crime or contempt, an attorney’s failure to comply with rule 9.20 is, inter alia, cause for disbarment, suspension, revocation of any pending disciplinary probation, and denial of an application for reinstatement after disbarment. (Cal. Rules of Court, rule 9.20(d).)

VI. ORDER OF INACTIVE ENROLLMENT

The order that Raymond Thomas Lee III be involuntarily enrolled as an inactive member of the State Bar pursuant to section 6007, subdivision (c)(4), effective August 3, 2018, will remain in effect pending consideration and decision of the Supreme Court on this recommendation.

STOVITZ, J.*

WE CONCUR:

PURCELL, P. J.

HONN, J.

*Retired Presiding Judge of the State Bar Court, serving as Review Judge Pro Tem by appointment of the California Supreme Court.

