IT'S NEVER TOO LATE

Finding
Happiness
In Your
Legal
Career

BY KRISTIN SCHEEL

teve Keeva, a former editor of the ABA Journal, said that, in the quest for "thinking like a lawyer," law students lose the ideals that called them to law school in the first place. If this is true, it's no surprise that lawyers have one of the highest rates of suicide, many of us would choose another profession if we could, and some of us are headed for substance abuse and depression. Maybe if we reconnected with our purpose at some point in our career, there would be less suffering among us.

Examining the Law School Experience

Recently I had the opportunity to mentor some law students. This chance encounter presented itself at an interesting time in my own legal career, as I had spent the last two years searching, planning, and patiently waiting to leave my in-house counsel position to shift my work so that it aligns with my objectives for attending law school.

As I met these students, I immediately sensed their distress. One of the students, eyes wide, rattled off her accomplishments. I wondered when she slept. The more she revealed about her law school career, I acknowledged her need for recognition, her anxiety, and lacking sense of self. It immediately took me back to my own law school experience, and I felt deep sadness as I observed her dismiss me as I encouraged students to follow their dreams. The other students were bewildered by me but were also curious about my plans.

I asked the students what motivated them to apply to law school. The answers I received were scattered, dancing around the question. They spoke of summer plans and bar exam stress. They spoke of mystery surrounding what job they want when they graduated, offering that any job would be sufficient given the current economic conditions. I tried not to cringe as I heard this and continued to ask the question, "Why did you want to become a lawyer?"

My reason for going to law school was based in altruism. I think this is common among lawyers and law students. Then something shifts. For me, it was disillusionment, utter confusion, and the press of student loan obligations. From there, I chose my first job, which didn't lead to happiness. My sense of self returned as a voice of complaint and dissatisfaction about what I was doing, and more important, what I wasn't doing. As long as my work didn't align with my purpose, this voice followed me.

Being Truthful

The first step to aligning with my purpose was being truthful about the choices I had made. To do this, I had to be honest about my strengths and limitations. I had to be honest about my financial needs and accept them as true and valid. I had to be honest about the kind of work that suits me.

It's easy to blame unhappiness on the job or even on certain aspects of a job, such as long hours, difficult coworkers or clients, insufficient raises or bonuses, etc. The truth is, the source of any unhappiness I felt was not a result of external conditions — the source was within myself.

Exploration

The next step was deciding what to do with all these truths. For me, it involved serious investment in personal development. I completed numerous trainings at my own expense (and vacation days). I volunteered extensively. I aligned with likeminded people. I looked for mentors. I inquired in every direction that seemed like a possible fit. I rode the wave when things did not work.

I spent more than a year in this phase of inquiry. It was not immediately gratifying. I imagined what my own expression of that perfect fit looked like even if I didn't know it to exist. One bright day I realized I could create it. I would go solo.

Honoring My Path

Every part of the path matters. This is the spirit I left my last employer with when I made the leap. Honoring the opportunities I have received in my legal career, both in law school and as a practicing lawyer, is an integral step to transitioning successfully. I am enormously grateful for all of my teachers, mentors, colleagues, clients, and each of my experiences.

I recognize the spirit that led me to law school. This same spirit was broken by the law school experience. Seven years later, as I embark on a new journey, I know it's right because the spirit mirrors how I arrived in law school.

I am now in private law practice and I am a yoga teacher. It all happens under one roof. My law practice is a culmination of all the best skills I acquired along my path. It's integrative, encourages healing, and helps clients craft sustainable, healthy legal solutions. I'm working directly with people. I witness and support their experience shift from bad to good. It's beautiful.

This looks different from my definition of altruism when I applied to law school. My journey allowed my definition of altruism to mature. This matters. All of this is larger than what I imagined for my legal career and I see much more ahead. It's joyful, truthful, and fully aligned with who I am as a lawyer. My hope for our profession is one of courage to honor our purposes, create what fulfills us, and lessen the suffering in our community. 3



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