

REVERSE ENGINEERING ONE'S LEGAL CAREER

*By Melanie Reid**

I. INTRODUCTION

There is a permanent glass sculpture inside the Great Hall at the Knoxville Museum of Art that is one of the largest figural glass installations in the world. It weighs seven to eight tons and is, at some places, 22 feet high.¹ It took five years to create and nine months to install.² The artist, Richard Jolley, was given total autonomy in deciding what to create – the Great Hall is filled with windows bringing in a tremendous amount of light, and it contains a staircase slashing through it at 45 degrees from a mezzanine above. Jolley toured the room and immediately knew he wanted to use the space to capture the human experience.³

Jolley began to draw, paint, forge, weld, cut, bend, and grind glass elements and eventually created what we can see today: *Cyle of Life: Within the Power of Dreams and the Wonder of Infinity*.⁴ There are seven parts to the narrative that represent the questions we all eventually ask of ourselves:

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¹ Cycle of Life: Within the Power of Dreams and the wonder of infinity, Knoxville Museum of Art (2024), <https://knoxart.org/exhibitions/cycle-of-life/> (last visited July 15, 2024).

² The museum had to install supports in the wall by adding support beams and reinforcements to support the installation. Cycle of Life: Within the Power of Dreams and the Wonder of Infinity, Knoxville Museum of Art (2024), <https://knoxart.org/exhibitions/cycle-of-life/> (last visited July 15, 2024).

³ "All we started with was a sense of space, and the idea we wouldn't impede on the floor space. David Butler (the director of the KMA) wanted an icon, something identifiable from the entrance, but there were no discussions of theme though, once I started, I knew it would be a life cycle." *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

“who are we?; what are we?; where do we come from?; and where are we going?”⁵

The first part of the sculpture on the left panel, named *Primordial*, is a dense forest of twenty-two vertical tree trunks with thousands of clear glass leaves and thistle clusters. It represents the mystery of human beginnings, where we came from and where we live.⁶ The second is *Emergence* with a man and woman walking out into the world together.⁷ The third part of the narrative symbolizes youth taking *Flight* which is represented by 127 black birds on a steel web.⁸ On the right panel, the fourth part, we see *Desire* – man and woman embracing each other.⁹ Next is the fifth part of the narrative called the *Tree of Life*, where a tree bears pomegranates and doves rest, symbolizing abundance, true adulthood, childbearing, and a time of growth, proliferation, and self-acceptance.¹⁰ The sixth part of the narrative is entitled *Contemplation*, which is in the form of a massive human head.¹¹ The figure’s lack of physicality indicates a time of reflection, of physically slowing down, and gradually progressing from physical concerns to spiritual ones as we age and confront our own mortality and where we might go.

The head is bisected by a “beam of light” made of crystal, as if the body is separating and the spirit is coming out.¹² This transformation in a Life cycle leads us to the center portion, named *Sky*, which is filled with multi-colored glass orbs mounted on an elliptical grid of interconnecting triangles that reflect the molecular structures of the earth and symbolize the unknown.¹³

As a docent walking through the museum with students of all ages, and as a law professor taking first year law students through the museum as part of our professional identity class, I have seen this sculpture many times. I have memorized the names of the narrative phases, regurgitated the facts as to how it was made, what it represents (from the artist’s perspective), and shared with students the names and dimensions of many of the glass objects contained within. But I never linger; I do not ask the students visiting the art museum their thoughts on the cycle of life, what their life experience has

⁵ Tina Oldknow, *Cycle of Life: Within the Power of Dreams and the wonder of infinity*, KNOXVILLE MUSEUM OF ART (2024), <https://knoxart.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Jolley-Exhibit-Brochure.pdf> (last visited July 15, 2024).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ Oldknow, *supra* note 5. The seventh part is titled *Sky* and consists of several balls of glass suspended from the ceiling that are meant to represent the universe. *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

been so far, what they are most looking forward to, and what they dread. I suppose I worry they might be bored if I stay too long,¹⁴ uncomfortable with silence as we take the art and its message in and dive deeper in reflection upon these heavy topics.

I arrived early one morning and decided to rest. I let go of my to-do list for a moment and just sat in a chair in the Great Hall and looked at the whole narrative before my eyes. If only the wise human head at the end of Life could inform those birds taking flight at the beginning of Life's journey and help them make better choices. If only that wise human head could have shared its message of enjoying the present moment and feeling truly alive while you still can, with those birds sitting on the branches of the *Tree of Life*. Life is so precious, and we are racing through until those final moments of contemplation and appreciation. What would it be like if we could go back in time with the wisdom that we accumulated over our Lifetime?

Jolley's *Cyle of Life* reminds me of a law student-then-lawyer's cycle of life. While in law school and ready to take *Flight*, the student is placed in a highly competitive environment fighting for good grades, externships, spots on extracurricular organizations, and hopefully, experiencing enough to figure out what type of law best suits them. Life is fast-paced, frenetic, and extreme.¹⁵ In the *Desire* phase, the new attorney is again focusing on doing—meeting client demands, billable hour demands, caseload demands, opposing counsel demands, and supervisor demands—all in a profession that is future-focused and founded on attempting to resolve human conflict. While the new lawyer gives way to the more experienced lawyer and the day-to-day work of being a lawyer becomes less of a daily drink out of the proverbial water hose, the *Tree of Life* phase brings with it additional demands: balancing work with an equally demanding personal life (managing relationships from all aspects of life, enjoying family and adult friendships, caring for children and/or older parents, keeping the physical body healthy, etc.). Somewhere between *Flight* and the *Tree of Life*, we oftentimes see the bird drop out of the lawyer Life cycle. The fast pace of the lawyer's life cycle can lead to a breaking point. These are the “recovering” lawyers – those who can no longer live with the reality the law profession has provided them (too many demands with no feelings of fulfillment or purpose), and they need to recover from the suffering they

¹⁴ The rule of thumb is no more than 15 minutes in each gallery. According to a 2015 study done by Microsoft, the average human adult attention span is a little more than 8 seconds. Kevin McSpadden, *You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish*, TIME (May 14, 2015), <https://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/>. The average attention span has decreased by 25% since 2000. *Id.*

¹⁵ See, e.g., Jerome M. Organ et al., *Suffering in Silence: The Survey of Law Student Well-Being and the Reluctance of Law Students to Seek Help for Substance Use and Mental Health Concerns*, 66 J. L. EDUC. 116, 123-24 (2016) (analyzing survey responses from over 3,000 law students in fifteen law schools).

experienced while in the profession. The “recovering lawyers” usually go to another extreme (the opposite of what is thought to be a lawyer) to finally find peace, self-acceptance, and fulfillment – they open up a yoga studio, own a chocolate shop,¹⁶ create a service-oriented app, become a pastor, or go into counseling to help other lawyers find their way.¹⁷

Others grind their way through the *Flight*, *Desire*, and *Tree of Life* phases. Unfortunately, this group suffers from a rampant proliferation of behavioral health problems, including alcohol dependency, depression, and anxiety.¹⁸ Negativity sets in, and the external motivators for continuing in the profession (money and prestige) no longer carry them through the tough days. Of course, this is not to say that there are not many positive, fulfilled attorneys out there who can inspire us all. But for the rest of us mere mortals, what can we learn from our elder role models who have figured out how to live fulfilling, meaningful lives as lawyers? Can we learn from the *Contemplation* phase where *being* replaces *doing*, and the human is provided the space and freedom to enjoy the moment and feel aliveness before death?

What if we could reverse engineer one’s legal career and redefine what it means to be successful at the *Flight* stage? What are the lessons to be learned? How do we learn them? And how do we get law students and young lawyers to be open to the message when they are in a different phase of Life? This Article intends to tackle these questions head on.

Part II of this Article will examine the challenges of being a lawyer and why so many lawyers are languishing.¹⁹ Part III will explore solutions to the languishing dilemma by: (1) reclaiming a lawyer’s sense of purpose and identifying a lawyer’s just cause, (2) finding a community of lawyers that

¹⁶ Jenny B. Davis, *How Sweet It Is: Lawyer builds a business around her award-winning Chocolate*, ABA JOURNAL (Aug. 1, 2024), <https://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/how-sweet-it-is-lawyer-builds-a-business-around-her-award-winning-chocolate>.

¹⁷ See, e.g., LAPTOP LIFESTYLE LAWYER, <https://laptoplifestylelawyer.com/> (last visited Mar. 17, 2025).

¹⁸ Brittany Stringfellow Otey, *Buffering Burnout: Preparing the Online Generation for the Occupational Hazards of the Legal Profession*, 24 S. CAL. INTERDIS. L.J. 147, 144-88 (2014) (reporting not only high levels of law student drinking, anxiety, and depression but also extreme reluctance to seek help to address mental health issues); see also Patrick R. Krill et al., *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns among American Attorneys*, 10 J. OF ADDICTION MEDICINE 46 (2016); BREE BUCHANAN AND JAMES C. COYLE, NATION TASK FORCE ON LAWYER WELL-BEING: CREATING A NATIONAL TASKFORCE (Aug. 14, 2017) <https://lawyerwellbeing.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Lawyer-Wellbeing-Report.pdf>; David Jaffe, Katherine M. Bender & Jerome Organ, “It Is Okay to Not Be Okay” *The 2021 Survey of Law Student Well-Being*, 60 U. LOUISVILLE L. REV. 439 (2022); INTERNATIONAL BAR ASSOCIATION, IBA YOUNG LAWYER’S REPORT 18, (Jan. 2022) <https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-Young-Lawyers-Report-2022>.

¹⁹ *Languishing*, OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (10th ed. 2023).

will walk the path with others and promote a sense of belonging and care; and (3) connecting with the self and with others by developing healthy habits and continually practicing those habits and reflective thinking processes. Part IV will argue this problem can only be solved through regular communication check-ins and suggests a certain structure to such meetings in order for it to be meaningful and beneficial for all group members. Part V acknowledges such suggestions will only make an impact if law students and young lawyers agree that such practices are a vital part to living a full and meaningful Life. More discussion is needed to find ways to persuade younger generations of the importance of reflecting upon long-term goals and what connection and mental well-being look like. Those working in the legal profession must care for themselves and their professional community so that they will have the energy and focus to continually improve the legal system and care for those seeking resolution and justice within the system itself.

II. THE PROBLEM

In his book *Languishing: Keys to Feel Alive Again in a World That Wears You Down*, Corey Keyes explains how many people today are languishing because of how society is structured and how professional systems are set up in ways that do not line up with our values and identities.²⁰ Languishing is described as “a sense of low-grade mental weariness that can be easy to dismiss, especially since indifference is one of its symptoms.”²¹ Some of the symptoms include feeling “disconnected from your own community and/or a greater purpose or cause” and your job starts “to seem pointless in the grand scheme of things.”²² You are no longer motivated to “reach out to friends and family and to maintain relationships that were once important to you.”²³ When languishing, joy or meaning in the activities you once enjoyed are hard to find.²⁴

Many attorneys are languishing and experiencing overall career dissatisfaction, finding themselves devoid of a sense of purpose in their work and in life. Others are experiencing burnout in their current legal

²⁰ COREY KEYES, *LANGUISHING: HOW TO FEEL ALIVE AGAIN IN A WORLD THAT WEARS US DOWN* xiii (2024).

²¹ *Id.* at x.

²² *Id.* at xi.

²³ *Id.* at xii.

²⁴ *Id.* at xi. Other symptoms of languishing include: feeling emotionally flattened, a sense of inevitability, procrastination, things are boring, disconnection, etc. *Id.* Keyes himself felt that languishing: “I was on autopilot, compelled to keep *doing*, to throw myself at activity after activity, leaving little room for the thoughts that rose up when I was alone with myself.” *Id.* at x.

position and are on their way to experiencing languishing.²⁵ A significant number of attorneys are even leaving the profession and soon fall into the “recovering” attorney category.²⁶ As a part of our law school’s professional identity course, we asked first-year law students to interview three attorneys or judges and ask them how a particular value (self-awareness, integrity, resilience, empathy, service, or excellence) mattered in the practice of law. Several students after conducting the interviews commented on how many attorneys they interviewed who said they were overworked and miserable.²⁷ A student working with attorneys at an externship site asked for advice and was told they should “run” (not walk) as far away as possible from practicing law.²⁸

The studies and statistics on the mental health of those in the legal profession are filled with doom and gloom. According to one study, lawyers rank fourth behind dentists, pharmacists, and physicians in terms of the highest per capita suicide rate.²⁹ Lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression than non-lawyers.³⁰ Forty percent of law students experienced depression upon graduation.³¹ Another ABA study stated that alcohol use disorders and mental health problems are happening in the legal profession at higher rates than in other professions and the general

²⁵ Burnout is an “‘occupational phenomenon’ that describes a mismatch between your workload and the resources you have to do it, which allows chronic stress to build up.” KEYES, *supra* note 20, at xiii. “[B]urnout can leave you so demoralized that languishing takes hold. When you’re constantly stretched too thin by work, it’s hard to find joy or meaning in the activities you once found greatly fulfilling.” *Id.*

²⁶ Sharon Miki, *Lawyer Burnout: Stopping it Before It Starts*, Clio (2021), <https://www.clio.com/blog/lawyer-burnout/> (last updated Apr. 15, 2024); *see also* *Burnout an “Occupational phenomenon”: International Classification of Diseases*, WORLD HEALTH ORG. (May 28, 2019) <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>; Neil Handwerker & Kimberly Fine, *The Great Escape: Nonlegal Careers For Lawyers*, ABOVE THE LAW (Jan. 9, 2025, 1:10 PM), <https://abovethelaw.com/2025/01/the-great-escape-nonlegal-careers-for-lawyers/> (explaining that lawyers who leave the law are called “recovering” lawyers because they either burn out or dislike practicing law and want to find another, more satisfying career in line with their passions).

²⁷ The request for attorneys to be interviewed were advertised in the state and local bar associations newsletters. Attorneys who responded were placed on a list and agreed to be interviewed.

²⁸ One student told the Associate Dean of Academics she wanted to quit based on these conversations. Perhaps law was not a good fit for this student. Understanding another’s frustrations as to the profession might at least open students’ eyes to the challenges associated with practice and incentivize them into finding the right fit for them.

²⁹ Patrick R. Krill, et al., *Stressed, Lonely, and Overcommitted: Predictors of Lawyer Suicide Risk*, HEALTHCARE (Feb 11, 2023). <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11040536>.

³⁰ W.W. Eaton, et al., *Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder*, 32 JOURNAL OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE 1079 (1990).

³¹ *Lawyers and Depression*, DAVID NEE FOUNDATION, <https://www.lawyerswithdepression.com/articles/law-schools-take-lead-students-well-report-finds/> (last visited July 25, 2024).

population.³² The study found that 28% of the responding lawyers experienced depression, 19% experienced anxiety, 23% experienced stress, and 20.6% of the lawyers reported problematic alcohol use.³³

Why are so many attorneys miserable? How many other professions can boast such high rates of unhappiness? I argue that a sense of languishing can generally be attributed to one of three reasons: (1) there is a mismatch between what a lawyer does and what a person who chooses the profession finds satisfying and fulfilling (oftentimes due to a lack of reflection on the front end); (2) the lawyer experiences a lack of purpose because they chose the law based on external motivations rather than internal motivations;³⁴ and/or (3) the lawyer is living out of balance and is focused on work, work, work.³⁵

A. *The Mismatch*

All three reasons for languishing in the legal profession can be seen in Michelle Obama's own story as to why she did not feel fulfilled as a lawyer.³⁶ Michelle Obama worked for a high-end law firm in Chicago litigating intellectual property issues for big corporations. Her own words in her autobiography *Becoming* demonstrate how a lack of reflection at the beginning of one's legal career (and even decision to go to law school) lays the foundation for unfulfillment in the practice of law:

If I'd stopped to think about it, I might have realized that I was burned-out by school—by the grind of lectures, papers, and exams—and probably would have benefited from doing something different. Instead, I took the LSAT, wrote my senior thesis, and dutifully reached for the next rung, applying to the best law schools in the country. I saw myself as smart, analytical, and ambitious. I'd been raised on feisty dinner-table debates with my parents. I could argue a point down to its theoretical essence and prided myself on never rolling over in a conflict. Was this not the stuff lawyers were made of? I figured it was. . .

³² Jeena Cho, *Tales of Addiction: What every attorney should know about alcohol and substance abuse*, A.B.A. J. (Oct 1, 2018, 1:20 AM), https://www.abajournal.com/magazine/article/addiction_attorney_alcohol_substance_abuse.

³³ *Id.* at 2.

³⁴ See Katya S. Cronin, *The Intentional Pursuit of Purpose: Nurturing Students' Authentic Motivation for Practicing Law*, 28 J. OF THE LEGAL WRITING INSTITUTE 159 (2024).

³⁵ See Aric Short, *Putting the Lawyer First: Framing Well-Being in Law as an Ethical Dilemma*, MERCER L. REV. 1409 (2024).

³⁶ Michelle Obama, *BECOMING* 135 (2018).

...

... I had no concrete ideas about what I wanted to do. Somehow, in all my years of schooling, I hadn't managed to think through my own passions and how they might match up with work I found meaningful.³⁷

Unfortunately, little time is spent in school teaching students reflective thinking and providing an opportunity for them to reflect on what they have learned (in both school and life) despite its incredible importance.³⁸ Educators have described reflective thinking as “the cogitation we go through in response to questions posed by that small voice in the back of our head such as: Why am I doing this? Have I looked at this from multiple points of view, or did I just adopt it from social media groupthink without comparing it to my own beliefs and values?”³⁹

The average age of the law student is around 25 years or younger.⁴⁰ Several students every year follow the same path as Michelle Obama and go straight from their undergraduate studies to entering law school. They too are tired, burned out from continual studying, and after the initial first year law school stress (and learning the new study routine), they are simply checking the boxes until graduation. Little time has been placed on what all this studying might lead to. What type of person am I? What brings me joy? What type of job fits my interests and personality? Other than being good at arguing at the dinner table and wanting to help others, what is driving my desire to go to law school and enter the legal profession? They are mindlessly climbing the ladder and checking the boxes. Choosing the legal profession because it is established and perhaps prestigious will not lead to personal fulfillment.

³⁷ *Id.* at 91.

³⁸ SUSAN J. KOVALIK ET AL., EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS II: THE LEARNING-CENTERED SCHOOL MODEL – USING NEUROSCIENCE TO IMPROVE STUDENT OUTCOMES 13.2 (2001). The importance of reflective thinking, particularly in the professional identity space, has become much more discussed in recent years as law schools have begun to find ways to implement ABA Standard 303(b). See Camesha Little, *Think, Reflect, Refine: Shaping the Modern Lawyer*, 13, (September 2024). <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4955611> [<http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4955611>] (forthcoming); Harmony Decosimo, *Reflections on Purpose and Professional Identity Formation*, 75 MERCER L. REV. 1441 (2024).

³⁹ *Id.* at 13.3.

⁴⁰ David Merson, *How Old Is Too Old for Law School?*, JURIS EDUC. (Jan. 18, 2023), <https://www.juriseducation.com/blog/how-old-is-too-old-for-law-school>. At LMU Law, the average age of the incoming class of 2024 is 24 years old, according to our Associate Dean of Admissions Randy Matthews. Interview with Randy Matthews, Assoc. Dean of Admin., Duncan Sch. of Law (Sept. 4, 2024).

B. Lack of Purpose and Focus on External Motivators

In her autobiography, the former First Lady also explains how her desire to be financially well off⁴¹ and to impress others led to her choice to work at the law firm:

I can admit now that I was driven not just by logic but by some reflexive wish for other people's approval, too. . . Professors, relatives, random people I met, asked what was next for me, and when I mentioned I was bound for law school—Harvard Law School, as it turned out—the affirmation was overwhelming. I was applauded just for getting in, even if the truth was I'd somehow squeaked in off the wait list. But I was in. People looked at me as if already I'd made my mark on the world.

This may be the fundamental problem with caring a lot about what others think: It can put you on the established path—the my-isn't-that-impressive path—and keep you there for a long time.⁴²

Harvard Professor Arthur Brooks teaches a Managing Happiness class and advocates that happiness is centered around four main areas: faith and life philosophy, family, community and friends, and meaningful work.⁴³ Meaningful work is defined as the work you do that makes you feel valuable and energetic.⁴⁴ And finding meaningful work requires reflection. What connects the person to the lawyer role they chose? Do they thrive in a litigating role, or do they dread the confrontation? Do they enjoy a contract drafting role or do they feel unfulfilled sitting behind a desk all day?

⁴¹ OBAMA, *supra* note 36, at 90 (“[I was] more dependent on my parents financially than I wanted to be.”).

⁴² *Id.* at 91.

⁴³ Arthur C. Brooks, *The Secrets to Happiness at Work*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Sept. 1, 2023), <https://hbr.org/2023/09/harvards-arthur-c-brooks-on-the-secrets-to-happiness-at-work>; see also The Atlantic's Podcast, Arthur C. Brooks & Becca Rashid, *How to Build a Happy Life: How to Not Be Your Own Worst Enemy*, ATLANTIC, at episode 2 (2021)[hereinafter *How to Not Be Your Own Worst Enemy*], <https://www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/archive/2021/10/howto-arthurbrooks-happiness-identity-drshefali-mindfulness-meaning-2021/620282/>; Arthur C. Brooks & Becca Rashid, *How to Build a Happy Life: How to Find the Secret to Meaningful Work*, ATLANTIC, at episode 6 (2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/archive/2021/11/work-happiness-purpose-arthur-brooks-jenn-lim-simon-sinek/620284/>

⁴⁴ The Atlantic's Podcast, Arthur C. Brooks & Becca Rashid, *How to Build a Happy Life: How to Not Be Your Own Worst Enemy*, ATLANTIC, at episode 2 (2021) [hereinafter *How to Not Be Your Own Worst Enemy*], <https://www.theatlantic.com/podcasts/archive/2021/10/howto-arthurbrooks-happiness-identity-drshefali-mindfulness-meaning-2021/620282/>.

Imagine if Michelle Obama had asked herself these questions before entering law school or choosing her associate position at the law firm: Does this profession and job choice align with my personal values and my passions? What do I enjoy spending time doing: crafting language for a contract, meeting with clients, negotiating with opposing counsel, or mulling over the law while developing an argument for my brief? Do I enjoy the thrill of the courtroom and orally arguing my point? Do I like performing in front of an audience of twelve? Am I driven by the idea of justice and compassion and want to be part of the community that is attempting to improve the legal system?⁴⁵ Does this group of lawyers seem to match my interests and interests in the law? Listen to that inner voice.

Many scholars and big thinkers have pondered the ingredients to a fulfilling life.⁴⁶ Many touch upon the same themes (albeit using different words) – that the ingredients to lasting success and happiness all surround internal motivations: enjoyment and connection, satisfaction and contentment, and identifying a sense of purpose.⁴⁷ What Michelle Obama expresses is one that many active and “recovering” attorneys can relate to - she was guided by what others might think about her choice of profession (*my-isn't-that-impressive*) and the external motivators of financial success. Clearly, these were not lasting motivators for her. She still lacked a sense of purpose and desperately sought meaningful work that would provide her with a sense of purpose.

It is important to reflect and identify whether we are living a life based on external motivators. Did we go to law school because we were drawn to this service-oriented profession,⁴⁸ or did we go to law school because our parents pushed us into it, or we did not know what else to do after college graduation, or we thought being a lawyer was prestigious and we could make a decent living? Did we reflect at all upon the decision to spend an additional three years in school to become a lawyer? What does being a lawyer mean; what does a lawyer do? What options do you have with a

⁴⁵ BRYAN STEVENSON, JUST MERCY 18 (2014) (“Finally, I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equality cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.”).

⁴⁶ Heather Craig, *The Philosophy of Happiness in Life (+ Aristotle’s View)*, Positive Psych., <https://positivepsychology.com/philosophy-of-happiness/> (last updated Oct. 11, 2024).

⁴⁷ *Harvard’s Arthur C. Brooks on the Secrets to Happiness at Work*, HARV. BUS. REV. (Sept. 1, 2023), <https://hbr.org/2023/09/harvards-arthur-c-brooks-on-the-secrets-to-happiness-at-work>; see generally *How to Build a Happy Life*, ATLANTIC, https://arthurbrooks.com/news/tag/pod_how-to-build-a-happy-life-with-arthur-brooks (last visited March 16, 2025).

⁴⁸ A service-orientation describes a mindset for serving others by understanding and catering to their needs.

J.D.? What do we want our law career to look like? What activities feed your soul and your pocketbook?

Unfortunately, if one comes into law school without the ability for reflective thinking already in place and has not identified why lawyering would provide meaning and purpose in their life, then there is little in law school that will support such processes. Law school is focused on teaching one to be a lawyer, not whether one wants to be a lawyer in the first place.⁴⁹ Moreover, if external motivations (money, prestige, etc.) were the reasons behind why the student applied to law school, the external motivations to be a lawyer are exacerbated once through the door. As Professor Larry Krieger has pointed out in his research, law schools tend to focus on external success (grades, honors, and high income) and very little on the internal (what makes up a lawyer's well-being).⁵⁰ Exploring one's intrinsic goals of personal growth, love, helping others, and building community will lead to much more life satisfaction than an exploration of extrinsic goals such as affluence, status, and power. The bottom line is that one's choices to either focus on internal or external goals and motivations will predict one's overall well-being.

C. Unbalanced Living: Work, Work, Work

Many have commented on the lawyer stereotype. Lawyers, for the most part, are type A, productive, disciplined, intelligent humans who are willing to work long hours to get the job done. Some enjoy the competitive, aggressive spirit of the game; some are more introverted and enjoy more indirect confrontations through emails and written counterproposals.⁵¹ Lawyers tend to be hard on themselves and others, and their workaholic tendencies cause them to live in the extreme rather than in balance.⁵² These

⁴⁹ I have met with students who are struggling in a course yet lack motivation and have often wondered why they decided to go to law school. If apathy has set in after one year of law school, how will you gain motivation in the practice of law? Or is it just apathy towards law school?

⁵⁰ Lawrence S. Krieger & Kennon M. Sheldon, *What Makes Lawyers Happy? A Data-Driven prescription to Redefine Professional Success*, 83 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 554, 560 (2015).

⁵¹ This is what is great about the law – there is a plethora of different tasks and jobs. See *600+ Things you can do with a law degree*, MASS. SCH. OF L. <https://www.mslaw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/600-things-you-can-do-with-a-law-degree.pdf> (last visited March 15, 2025)..

⁵² Eric Sigurdson, *A Crisis of Stress: The Legal Profession's Struggle for Peace of Mind – Purpose, Balance, and Self-Awareness*, Sigurdson Post (Oct. 30, 2018), <http://www.sigurdsonpost.com/2018/10/30/a-crisis-of-stress-the-legal-professions-struggle-for-peace-of-mind-purpose-balance-and-self-awareness/>.

However, there are arguments to be made that there are times and places where excellence for its own sake is part of a worthwhile calling, entailing some level of chaos (and extreme work) that ultimately leads to a more fulfilled life. Law school itself might be one example.

habits can start in law school – students learn to study hard, pull all-nighters, take exams, and then escape the stress through alcohol or other medications. Work hard, play hard.

Michelle Obama, finding little fulfillment in her legal work, points out that her lack of passion for the “bloodless intricacies of the law”⁵³ did not mean she did not work extremely hard:

Your passion stays low, yet under no circumstance will you underperform. You live, as you always have, by the code of effort/result, and with it you keep achieving until you think you know the answers to all the questions—including the most important one. Am I good enough? Yes, in fact I am.

You’ve joined the tribe. At the age of twenty-five, you have an assistant. You make more money than your parents ever have. Your co-workers are polite, educated, and mostly white. You wear an Armani suit and sign up for a subscription wine service. You make monthly payments on your law school loans and go to step aerobics after work. Because you can, you buy yourself a Saab.⁵⁴

Working without a sense of purpose and meaning and on top of that, practicing law six or seven days a week for 8-12 hours a day to meet billable hour requirements or keep up with an overwhelming caseload is a recipe for disaster. On the outside, everyone will be encouraging you to stay and maintain this lucrative, impressive lifestyle; on the inside, you have lost a sense of self.

Passionate dedication to a true calling may produce contentment where others might see only drudgery. The predicate, however, is some sense of calling to seek excellence in the work setting. *But see* Dean Karnazes, *THE ROAD TO SPARTA* 29-30 (2016) (“People speak of finding balance. To me, that’s a misplaced ambition. If you have balance, you do everything okay. But to excel at your craft, you need obsessive, unbridled fanaticism. Not only does excellence require such commitment, it demands it. A life worth living is frenetic, disjointed, breakneck, and quite fantastic. Balance doesn’t lead to happiness – impassioned dedication to one’s life purpose does. Some might say that this is the price one must pay for high achievement. But with all the high achievers I’ve ever met, none of them speak of such a toll. Instead, they talk of boundless energy and infinite vigor that crosses into every element of their lives. The only time I hear people speak of dreary, exhaustive drudgery is when their daily work is misaligned with their life’s calling.”).

⁵³ OBAMA, *supra* note 36, at 92.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

The true self⁵⁵ is comprised of a mind (that contains thoughts), a physical body, emotions, and a spirit/soul.⁵⁶ The problem with spending all of one's time at work is that only one part of the self is being nourished: the mind. The lawyer lives in the mind. The lawyer is trained to stay in the mind, critically think, separate the emotions from the facts of the case, and apply the facts of the case to the law. The lawyer has little time for emotions. In fact, it is important to pull out the relevant facts from the client's story and craft a winning argument from only the facts that matter in a courtroom, not irrelevant, emotional facts that have no bearing on the legal rules and rule applications.⁵⁷ This leads lawyers to forget about their physical bodies (until they start to break down) and repress their own emotions because they have been taught to remove the emotion from their clients' stories.⁵⁸ Why start feeling now?

Being a lawyer is candy for the mind, which can make this an incredibly intellectually challenging and fulfilling profession. However, the inability to quiet the mind at times and enjoy an activity to exercise the body or feel the connection and positive emotions while around loved ones, or spending time in nature or silence or in a faith-based institution to nourish the soul, will lead to burnout, resentment, and emptiness.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Rebecca J. Schlegel, Joshua A. Hicks, Jamie Arndt, & Laura A. King, *Thine Own Self: True Self-Concept Accessibility and Meaning in Life*, 96 J. OF PERSONALITY AND SOC. PSYCH., 473, 473–90 (2009).

⁵⁶ See Elizabeth Perry, *Out-of-Sorts? Strengthening Your Mind, Body, Soul Connection Can Help*, BETTERUP (Nov. 5, 2021), <https://www.betterup.com/blog/mind-body-and-soul/>; Liz Watt, *Why Is Mind Body Heart And Soul The Real Holy Trinity?*, LIZWATT.COM (Jan. 15, 2020), <https://lizwatt.com/articles/mind-body-heart-soul/>; *Integrating Mind, Body, and Spirit: A Holistic Approach to Wellness*, CONTINENTAL HOSPITALS (Apr. 24, 2024), <https://continentalhospitals.com/blog/integrating-mind-body-and-spirit-a-holistic-approach-to-wellness/>.

⁵⁷ See Laurie Levenson, *Courtroom Demeanor: The Theater of the Courtroom*, 92 MINN. L. REV. 573, 574 (2007). (“One view of the courtroom is that of a controlled laboratory in which the science of the law is performed. Under this model, attorneys present evidence, the judge supervises for quality control, and the jurors give the results of the experiment; there is little room for emotions or actions whose impact cannot be predicted. A trial is simply the sum of the parties’ formal evidence: eyewitness testimony, exhibits, and stipulations. Neither the words of counsel, nor the mannerisms of the defendant off the stand, nor the reaction of the gallery affects the outcome of a case.”).

⁵⁸ See generally Katherine Cullen, *Suppressing Emotions Can Harm You—Here's What to Do Instead*, PSYCH. TODAY (Dec. 23, 2022), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-truth-about-exercise-addiction/202212/suppressing-emotions-can-harm-you-heres-what-to-do>; Daniel Goleman, *Health: New Studies Report Health Dangers of Repressing Emotional Turmoil*, N.Y. TIMES (Mar. 3, 1988), <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/03/us/health-new-studies-report-health-dangers-of-repressing-emotional-turmoil.html>.

⁵⁹ “Really it was simple. The first thing was that I hated being a lawyer. I wasn’t suited to the work. I felt empty doing it, even if I was plenty good at it.” OBAMA, *supra* note 36, at 132.

Excessive working leads to excessive thinking. Excessive mind chatter without pause leads to extreme behaviors, such as seeking relief at the corner bar or engaging in other forms of extreme, escape-like actions and addictions. Balance is needed in all aspects of life to validate all parts of the true self. Lawyers have a hard time reducing their caseload or walking away from lucrative jobs with high billable hour requirements. Discipline and a strong work ethic are admirable traits; however, in the long run, they can be our greatest adversary in the search for balance and overall well-being.

In summary, most of a lawyer's dilemma while on the quest for fulfillment and happiness lies in their laser-like focus while in the *Flight*, *Desire*, and *Tree of Life* phases: doing, doing, and more doing.⁶⁰ The focus is always on the future and society's expectations that one completes life's checklist to be successful. Graduate from law school, work as a lawyer, get lots of clients, make lots of money, get married, have kids, get promoted, establish a reputation as a successful lawyer in the community, keep going, don't stop, pay one's bills, save up for retirement. Life becomes a blur and, hopefully, someday you will have time to review all those fabulous selfies you took along the way to remember the moment (perhaps when you retire).

III. THE SOLUTION

Michelle Obama, wrestling with what to do with her life to find fulfillment, decided to write out her thoughts in a journal, and on the first page, wrote: "*One, I feel very confused about where I want my life to go. What kind of person do I want to be? How do I want to contribute to the world?*"⁶¹

These are incredibly personal and thought-provoking questions that require time and space for reflection. There is no external top ten list of things to do to find success or life hack apps to master that will provide the answers to this question. There is also no grandmaster or guru that can answer these questions for you. The answers can only come from the self through reflection, support from the community in the search for answers, and reliance on elders who have already gone through such evaluations and come out the other side with wisdom to share.

What many elders in the *Contemplation* phase will say is this: find your sense of purpose, find your community, and live life as a whole person, acknowledging all parts of the self and providing space in your day to enjoy all aspects of life.

⁶⁰ Or rather, thinking about doing more, doing more, and doing more.

⁶¹ OBAMA, *supra* note 36, at 132.

A. Reclaiming a Sense of Purpose and Meaning: the Legal Profession's Just Cause

*People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it.*⁶²

—Simon Sinek

In *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, author Stephen Covey emphasizes the importance of seeing the big picture of your life and keeping the end in mind as a starting point against which all your actions are measured.⁶³ Starting at the beginning with the end in mind can be difficult to do. Oftentimes, we are constantly busy with life challenges in the moment that we fail to see the big picture.⁶⁴ However, if we can, this big picture will keep us focused and motivated to face all those life challenges along the way.

Imagine if we began our law careers with a clear mission for our lives. That overall goal could then become how we determine how we spend our days and in turn—how we spend our lives. The reason behind why we went to law school and why we chose this profession could keep us moving in the right direction as we change and grow.

But crafting a mission or vision statement such as “I want to help others,” or even more specifically, “I want to become a family law attorney to help others suffering from domestic abuse,” will not suffice. Simon Sinek, in *The Infinite Game*, argues that we must focus on something larger than ourselves to find fulfillment. Sinek refers to this focus as a “just cause.”⁶⁵ A just cause is described as “a specific vision of a future state that does not yet exist; it is a future state so appealing that people are willing to make sacrifices to help advance toward that vision.”⁶⁶

A just cause defines where we are going and what type of world we hope to live in and will commit to help build.⁶⁷ The just cause is the ideal vision of the house we hope to build and it also, hopefully, inspires us to stay focused beyond our own immediate rewards and setbacks and individual case wins and losses. The just cause is meant to provide the context for all the cases we work on along the way and inspire us to want to stay in the

⁶² SIMON SINEK, *START WITH WHY: HOW GREAT LEADERS INSPIRE EVERYONE TO TAKE ACTION* (2011).

⁶³ STEPHEN R. COVEY, *THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE* 114 (2004).

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 375. This is why those in the Contemplation phase of life have an easier time looking at the past and seeing the big picture. *Id.*

⁶⁵ SIMON SINEK, *THE INFINITE GAME* 40 (2019).

⁶⁶ *Id.* at 40.

⁶⁷ *Id.* at 33.

game. The just cause allows us to endure not just in the present but for lifetimes beyond our own.⁶⁸

Few professions have a better just cause than the mission of the legal profession. As described in the ABA's Model Rules of Professional Conduct, "Lawyers play a vital role in the preservation of society."⁶⁹ Humans learned early on that the survival of the species depended upon working together to fight off larger or deadly animal predators, gather enough food to sustain the community, and seek shelter. Humans have always lived in communities, and societies must maintain some sort of order and set of standards to live by to survive and prosper.⁷⁰ The legal system is designed to define and maintain human relationships and set social expectations.⁷¹ Laws are created to manage relationships and maintain order, and a subsequent violation of such laws can lead to punishment and/or victim restitution.

At the risk of stating the obvious, lawyers (and how lawyers decide to perform their duties) are critical to the effectiveness of a legal system. A lawyer, as a member of the legal profession, as a representative of clients, as an officer of the legal system, and as a public citizen, has a special responsibility to ensure justice and compassion reign.⁷² The Model Rules provide specifics as to the lawyer's just cause which, in turn, gives our work and our lives meaning:

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 33-49. A just cause must be for something, inclusive, service-oriented, resilient, and idealistic. *Id.*

⁶⁹ MODEL RULES OF PRO. CONDUCT r. pmbl. 13 (AM. BAR. ASS'N, 2024).

⁷⁰ David Boaz, *Key Concepts of Libertarianism*, CATO (Apr. 12, 2019), <https://www.cato.org/commentary/key-concepts-libertarianism>.

⁷¹ Susan W. Brenner, *Fantasy Crime: The Role of Criminal Law in Virtual Worlds*, 11 VAND. J. ENT. & TECH. L. 1, 4-5 (2008), ("[C]ivil rules define relationships (e.g., ruler-ruled, husband-wife, employer-employee) and allocate tasks (e.g., farmer, teacher, mayor). They also set legitimate social expectations (e.g., emancipation, safety, property ownership) and establish a baseline of order by defining the behaviors that are "appropriate in that society. The members of a society tend to abide by its civil rules because they are socialized to believe in them; most members of a society consequently believe that conforming their behavior to the civil rules is the right thing to do. Individuals gain approval and avoid disapproval by conforming to the dictates of the civil rules. But this set of rules, alone, is not enough in human societies; it suffices to maintain order in other biological systems, but because humans are highly intelligent, they have the capacity to deviate. Unlike other biological species and the artificial entities so far created, humans can, and do, deliberately violate the civil rules that are meant to maintain internal order.") (citations omitted).

⁷² MODEL RULES OF PRO. CONDUCT r. pmbl. 1 (AM. BAR. ASS'N, 2024). *See also* Jim Leach, *Wendell Berry, Landsman*, NAT'L ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES, May-June 2012. <https://www.neh.gov/humanities/2012/mayjune/conversation/wendell-berry-landsman>. (Wendell Berry explains to Jim Leach: "[The law is meant to work for justice. But people who know themselves know that, at some point, justice had better be mitigated by mercy. And you don't get to mercy by a legal principle. You get to mercy by way of imagination, sympathy, tenderness of heart – which are not weaknesses.").

- (1) The lawyer should seek improvement of the law, to include: access to the legal system, the administration of justice, and the quality of service rendered by the legal profession.⁷³
- (2) The lawyer should cultivate knowledge of the law beyond its use for clients, employ that knowledge in reform of the law and work to strengthen legal education; and
- (3) The lawyer should ‘further the public's understanding of and confidence in the rule of law and the justice system because legal institutions in a constitutional democracy depend on popular participation and support to maintain their authority.’⁷⁴

Gain knowledge, educate others, serve clients, and improve the legal system. In essence, a lawyer needs to look beyond the case at hand and feel inspired about being part of a group of individuals dedicated to improving a system needed for human survival. The legal system is the backbone of human society and is the mechanism by which humans can live together in a (somewhat) organized fashion. Without laws, there would be anarchy. Lawyers, as contributors, are giving society their ideas and hard work to help advance the just cause of continually improving the legal system for the benefit of everyone in society. And we all know this legal system needs improvement. This just cause can “endure political, technological, and cultural change” and should, hopefully, serve as an invitation for younger generations to join in the advancement of a cause greater than ourselves.⁷⁵

⁷³ MODEL RULES OF PRO. CONDUCT r. pmbl. 6 (AM. BAR. ASS’N, 2024), states:

A lawyer should be mindful of deficiencies in the administration of justice and of the fact that the poor, and sometimes persons who are not poor, cannot afford adequate legal assistance. Therefore, all lawyers should devote professional time and resources and use civic influence to ensure equal access to our system of justice for all those who because of economic or social barriers cannot afford or secure adequate legal counsel. A lawyer should aid the legal profession in pursuing these objectives and should help the bar regulate itself in the public interest.

Id. Needless to say, we have much to improve upon to fix the brokenness of the legal system as it currently stands.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ SINEK, *supra* note 65, at 44. Sinek points to the words of the Declaration of Independence as an example of a worthy just cause: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,” the Founding Fathers of the United States wrote in the Declaration of Independence, “that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” *Id.* at 35. “The vision they set

This just cause is easy to forget—how am I improving the law and instilling public confidence in the justice system if I am working twelve hours a day representing a chemical conglomerate in an antitrust trial involving the sale of one of its business holdings?⁷⁶ Lawyers like Michelle Obama are quick to point out, where is the just cause in that? How am I contributing?

Doctors have a similar service-oriented just cause to lawyers. Their Hippocratic Oath requires them to provide their patients with advice and encouragement in their efforts to sustain their own health and continue to improve the quality of medical care and public health.⁷⁷ However, the benefits of having a just cause may be easier for a doctor to see and feel earlier on than a lawyer. Doctors can meet with a patient and provide them with immediate relief. Surgeons identify a problem and fix the issue in one surgery. Doctors may give their best advice to a patient and never see them again. Whereas lawyers might meet a client on a particular matter, and the client might not experience relief until years later, if ever. The euphoria of a win at trial is quickly lost as the next case is waiting around the corner. The just cause is forgotten in the drudgery of day-to-day lawyering.⁷⁸

But the law has just as strong a just cause (or stronger) than the medical profession. The law is a diverse, justice-oriented, client-centered, and service-centered profession.⁷⁹ On those rough days requiring hours of document review, meticulously editing documents, double checking work to comply with technical rules, or handling difficult personalities (clients, opposing counsel, supervisors, colleagues, judges, etc.), do not forget your

forth was not simply one of a nation defined by borders but of an ideal future state defined by principles of liberty and equality for all.” *Id.* “If the founders of the United States had only set out a goal --to win independence—once it was achieved, they would have grabbed a pint of ale and sat around playing rounds of ninepins and ring taw while regaling each other with how great it was that they won the war. But that’s not what happened. Instead, they got to work writing a constitution . . . to further codify a set of enduring principles to protect and advance their big, bold, idealistic vision of the future. . . . Those victories must serve as milestones of our progress toward an idealized future.” *Id.* at 46-47.

⁷⁶ OBAMA, *supra* note 36, at 134.

⁷⁷ Rachel Hajar, The Physician's Oath: Historical Perspectives, 18 HEART VIEWS 154, 156-57 (2017).

⁷⁸ Celli Horstman & Corrine Lewis, How Primary Care Is Faring Two Years into the COVID-19 Pandemic, The Commonwealth Fund (Feb. 23, 2022), <https://www.commonwealthfund.org/blog/2022/how-primary-care-faring-two-years-covid-19-pandemic>; See also Shanafelt, Tait D., Colin P. West, Lotte N. Dyrbye, Mickey Trockel, Michael Tutty, Hanhan Wang, Lindsey E. Carlasare, and Christine Sinsky, Changes in burnout and satisfaction with work-life integration in physicians during the first 2 years of the COVID-19 pandemic, In Mayo Clinic Proceedings, vol. 97, no. 12, at 2248-2258 (2022).

⁷⁹ Artika R. Tyner, *Planting People, Growing Justice: The Three Pillars of New Social Justice Lawyering*, 10 HASTINGS RACE & POVERTY L.J. 219, 244-48 (2013).

value as a member of the legal profession and your potential to contribute to the legal profession and system we all live in today.

In a profession where catastrophizing is par for the course, and in fact, encouraged to minimize (or at least fully evaluate) a client's risk and potential exposure, optimism is also needed. This is an honorable and much-needed profession. What you are doing matters. Remember the just cause. Try to stay optimistic. As Mark Manson writes, "Pessimists get to sound smart. Optimists get to actually change and grow."⁸⁰

B. Finding Community and a Space for Reflection

*How might your life have been different if there had been a place for you . . . a place of [lawyers], where you were received and affirmed? A place where other [lawyers], perhaps somewhat older, had been affirmed before you, each in her time, affirmed, as she struggled to become more truly herself.*⁸¹

—Judith Duerk

Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) has had an extremely high rate of success in helping alcoholics achieve sobriety since its founding in 1937.⁸² People are drawn to A.A. because they have a desire to stop drinking and once in the program, many experience a spiritual awakening as a result of practicing the Twelve Steps and continue on the path towards good living.⁸³ The magic of A.A. is in its simplicity—its regular communal meetings⁸⁴ and its individualized sponsor/sponsee relationships.⁸⁵ Through relationships and a fellowship of people, individuals are supported and encouraged to choose healthy habits rather than destructive ones. During the meetings, members are not told what to do or given advice as to how to live their lives. Rather, they are given the space to share and reflect on their personal experiences.

The lack of cohesion within the legal profession leaves it desperate for community. Lawyers need to support other lawyers, particularly younger

⁸⁰ Mark Manson, *Would You Rather Be Right or Happy?*, (July 1, 2024), <https://markmanson.net/breakthrough/081-would-you-rather-be-right-or-happy>.

⁸¹ JUDITH DUERK, *CIRCLE OF STONES: WOMAN'S JOURNEY TO HERSELF* 47 (2011).

⁸² ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, *The Start and Growth of A.A.*, <https://www.aa.org/the-start-and-growth-of-aa> (last visited Mar. 13, 2025).

⁸³ ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, *TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS* 5-8 (2002).

⁸⁴ The purpose of all meetings is for A.A. members to "share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism." ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, *What to Expect at an A.A. Meeting*, <https://www.aa.org/information-about-meetings> (last visited Mar. 13, 2025).

⁸⁵ See generally ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, *QUESTIONS & ANSWERS ON SPONSORSHIP* (rev. ed. June, 2022).

lawyers who are overwhelmed, learning the nuances of the job and working long hours to keep pace. Just as in A.A., the community approach of gathering lawyers together to share would allow them some much-needed socialization (outside the typical bar association/social activities often involving alcohol), offer interpersonal learning, instill hope, and shine a light on the universality of the profession. In other words, you are not alone in your frustrations with the day-to-day stress that the profession entails. Through community and fellowship, lawyers can find an outlet to connect with others and to the profession's just cause and learn from others' experiences.

Those elder lawyers (either retired or practicing in the second half of life) in the *Contemplation* stage can be sponsors/mentors to others and share their insights and experiences as the group re-connects with themselves and each other. Reflective thinking is best done in a group setting where others can provide different perspectives and share insights one individual mind alone cannot fathom.

We seldom tap into the wisdom of those who have gone before us and who may have experienced the same type of professional monotony and dissatisfaction. There is a vast array of knowledge there, and many want to share it with no outlet to do so.⁸⁶ All humans (particularly those with life experience to share) want to feel useful and want to give back but so often, no one is asking for their input.⁸⁷ As Albert Einstein is claimed to have said, "insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."⁸⁸ The legal profession has not changed so drastically in the last decade, that current practitioners are experiencing unique problems (perhaps different versions of the same problems older generations faced). While we may think we are unique, we are not. And we need to cultivate an authentic and supportive community and foster positive personal

⁸⁶ See Kyu-taik Sung, *Elder Respect Among Young Adults: A Cross-Cultural Study of Americans and Koreans*, 18 J. OF AGING STUD. 215, 226-28 (2004); Mayumi Karasawa et al., *Cultural Perspectives on Aging and Well-Being: A Comparison of Japan and The United States*, 73 Int'l J. of Aging and Hum. Dev. 73, 94 (2011) (compared to other societies and cultures, our country seems to have little to moderate respect for our elderly). See also, MATTHEW FOX, *THE A.W.E. PROJECT: REINVENTING EDUCATION*, 136-37 (2006) ("This working together of elders and youth is needed today on a grand scale. But one of the most serious problems we face is that we have had a loss of eldership, thanks to the breakdown of community and the destruction of indigenous communities. . . . Furthermore, in Western cultures especially, the elders are often choosing to "retire" away from and separated from the young, effectively leaving the young to fend for themselves.").

⁸⁷ David Brooks, *The Essential Skills for Being Human*, N.Y. TIMES (Oct. 19, 2023), <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/19/opinion/social-skills-connection.html>.

⁸⁸ Steve Nadis, *Einstein's Parable of Quantum Insanity*, QUANTA MAG. (Sept. 10, 2015), <https://www.quantamagazine.org/einsteins-parable-of-quantum-insanity-20150910/>.

relationships to find nourishment, identify common threads, and drive to continue in the profession long-term.⁸⁹

C. Living as a Whole, Authentic Person

As Corey Keyes elaborates in his book, “[i]f we’re feeling record levels of stress, anxiety, burnout, and of course, languishing, how can it be only *your* fault?”⁹⁰ The legal profession itself is a lot to blame for creating the conditions that lead to such languishing among attorneys. With the potential to provide people with a strong sense of meaning and purpose in life, why has the legal profession created such miserable working conditions for so many lawyers? Why are lawyers so overworked to the point of denying the other parts of themselves and losing a sense of purpose?

The legal profession’s failures have continually worn-down attorneys over time and a sense of weary detachment from the profession sets in. Some attorneys in private practice attempt to remedy their frustration with billable hours and/or excessive work hours by choosing government work, clerkships, corporate counsel, or J.D. preferred jobs. While this may eliminate a billable hour requirement and *might* reduce an overwhelming caseload,⁹¹ it still may be work that looks far different from what you really wanted to do as a lawyer (as seen on TV or in the deep recesses of your mind the day you started law school).

Therein lies the rub: your mind is trying to reconcile what you wanted to do (or thought you wanted to do) when starting law school and what you have ended up doing. This can be a bitter pill to swallow. Many law students enter the profession motivated to serve, help others, and be leaders in their communities only to have the realities of law practice smack them in the face. Unfortunately, not everyone can be a human rights lawyer and travel the world with the Red Cross assisting clients facing the latest global disaster or litigating in the International Criminal Court against crimes of genocide or become a Supreme Court Justice. Most are faced with

⁸⁹ Patrick Shiltz, *On Being a Happy, Healthy, and Ethical Member of an Unhappy, Unhealthy, and Unethical Profession*, 52 VAND. L. REV. 871, 936-50 (1999) (Speaking of not being unique, a law professor while I was in law school was pointing out the same problems with the legal profession that I am pointing out in this article. The problem stays the same – new solutions to the same problem need to be considered).

⁹⁰ KEYES, *supra* note 20, at xiii.

⁹¹ David L. Hudson Jr., *A Too-Heavy Load*, 110 A.B.A.J. 20, 20-21 (2024) (I use the word “might” because government attorneys also carry heavy caseloads. A recent study by the RAND Corp., the National Center for State Courts and the ABA’s Standing Committee on Legal Aid and Indigent Defense “calls for a significant reduction in workloads for those who do criminal justice work in the public sector.” The director of the Missouri State Public Defender System stated that “attorneys a few years out of law school [] are representing between 150 and 200 people at a time.” According to Dean Jon Gould, both prosecutors and attorneys are “handling too many cases, and the result threatens the administration of justice.”).

mountains of debt after law school and take jobs where they can find them, and the day-to-day practice can seem uninspiring. Clients are never satisfied (even if you take their call at midnight and negotiate a decent settlement), and for every case that is won, many more are lost. If I can just survive this law firm for the next three years and pay off my student loans, then I can quit and start truly living and enjoying life. Even a lawyer with excellent time management and client management skills may find it difficult to stay positive in a conflict-ridden and, at times, grueling profession.

There is no easy solution. The legal profession requires a makeover and needs to take a look at all the working conditions lawyers face daily and see what can be changed and should be changed to allow for flourishing rather than languishing.⁹² Now is a better time than ever to explore opportunities for change, especially since COVID and artificial intelligence (AI) have drastically changed how, where, and when lawyers work. Post-COVID, more and more attorneys are working virtually from home and locations other than the traditional office, providing them with more flexibility to juggle life obligations with work obligations. AI can be used (and is starting to be used) to eliminate parts of the job lawyers most despise. AI is helping law firms align pricing with legal tasks (and eliminating the dreaded billable hour), making legal searches faster, and reducing the time it takes to review documents.⁹³ AI can make attorneys more efficient and eliminate some of the tasks that drain them so they can focus on more creative or meaningful tasks.⁹⁴

Aside from surrounding ourselves with a community of care and belonging, how can we reconnect to the self and find fulfillment? As much as AI can make us more efficient and we can improve our working conditions, a lawyer's job cannot be the end-all-be-all. It should not be something we dread, but we also must have realistic expectations. It cannot fill the tank as to all aspects of ourselves.

⁹² Keyes, *supra* note 20, at xv (According to Keyes, flourishing occurs when we improve our psychological, relational, and social functioning “[l]earning to hold our emotions more loosely, change the stories we tell ourselves, become more accepting of ourselves and others, and form communities of care and belonging, creates a virtuous cycle, increasing our tolerance for stress, adversity, and the pressures of modern living. . . . Focusing on healthy functioning may require a shift in priorities.”).

⁹³ Daniel Braff & Victor Li, *Need for Speed*, 110 A.B.A.J. 14, at 14 (2024) (At the ABA Techshow, attorney Jayne Reardon pointed out, “This is a different moment, where there is the opportunity for creation and doing things completely differently than in the past.” AltFee is a legal pricing and fixed-fee management software company that allows law firms to eliminate the billable hour. “The company believes that 89% of law firms earn the same or more when pricing with AltFee.”).

⁹⁴ More brainstorming needs to take place as to what we can ask AI to do: what is it about your job you dread? Can AI take over some of this? When it comes to drudgery at work, AI is your friend.

The lawyer identity is necessary at work, when facing clients (calm, confident you) or when facing opposing counsel (aggressive, strong you), or when running up against a deadline (serious, focused you), but the lawyer identity is only one of the many identities that make up the self. The lawyer identity must be discarded, and the spouse and/or parent identity acquired when entering the home or you may find yourself cross-examining your spouse or unnecessarily yelling at your child (thinking it is because his room is dirty when it's really about the hearing you just lost). Staying in that lawyer identity for too long will cause you to lose perspective, and you fail to see all identities as necessary parts of you.

Not only are we made up of a variety of identities (parent, daughter/son, sister/brother, spouse, friend, runner, pickleball player, golfer, quilter, gamer, etc.), but we need to connect with all parts of the self, mind, body, emotions, and spirit, to feel truly alive and live in the present moment. That requires the mind to rest and allow other parts to be nurtured whether that be the body grounded in exercise or movement, emotions expressed during a coffee break conversation with a friend or vacation with your partner, the spirit nourished in silence, meditation, or worship services. Living as an authentic whole person means acknowledging all parts of the self and setting aside time for all aspects to take part in life. Overworking the mind can cause our thoughts to take over and allow for little rest or alignment with other parts of the self.

Maureen Murdock in *The Heroine's Journey* talks about the need to connect with both our feminine and masculine sides of self and how balance in life is achieved if we make a conscious choice to allow for a state of being rather than get caught up in a continual state of doing:

Being requires accepting oneself, staying within oneself and not *doing* to prove oneself. It is a discipline that is accorded no applause from the outside world; it questions production for production's sake. Politically and economically it has little value, but its simple message has wisdom. If I can accept myself as I am, and if I am in harmony with my surroundings, I have no need to produce, promote, or pollute to be happy. And being is not passive; it takes focused awareness.⁹⁵

To younger generations of lawyers caught up in states of doing-doing-doing, this being and doing distinction may make no sense. But doing is always forward-thinking: the next promotion, the next big case, the next car, the next house, the next vacation, the next relationship. A state of being allows you to accept all parts of yourself and this moment—as is. You don't

⁹⁵ MAUREEN MURDOCK, *THE HEROINE'S JOURNEY: WOMAN'S QUEST FOR WHOLENESS* 128 (2020).

need to “do” anything—you are already a whole, authentic person in this moment. Being requires rest from the doing, acceptance of ourselves, and space to find practices to help you ground and recenter yourself.

So often the profession requires lawyers to wear layers of masks to accomplish the many tasks needed to resolve a case. All these masks can leave one stuck in the lawyer identity, and the true essence of the self is covered up and neglected.⁹⁶ As we slow down, the final phase of life (*Contemplation*) allows us to see the big picture – recognizing all parts of the self, finding the true self again (to be truly alive), and being present in the moment. If only we could be reminded of the bigger picture and the importance of acknowledging all aspects of the self while in earlier phases of life.

IV. THE IMPLEMENTATION

Lawyers can only find fulfillment among others in their profession if they find a community of lawyers that not only understands the stresses of the job but also supports each individual in their renewed commitment to self, reflection, and personal growth. Many times, lawyer gatherings fall into the trap that many other types of groups fall into – they spend the time together complaining about work, blaming others, and finding fault.⁹⁷ While it may sometimes feel good to commiserate with others, such activities have been found to actually increase stress, anxiety, and tension rather than decrease it.⁹⁸ That type of community will not support good mental health and allow for lasting fulfillment in the profession to take root.

How do we build community that will allow us to flourish? Community-building should start where it all begins: law school. If law students are exposed to what a flourishing community of lawyers looks like and are taught (by application) how reflective thinking works, these students can transition as lawyers with the seeds planted and the reflective practices and community in place to thrive.

How do we structure a supportive community? Creating cohesion among the group and engaging in reflective thinking requires a safe emotional and physical environment and a sense of community dedicated

⁹⁶ *Understanding Masking: The Hidden Struggle for Social Acceptance*, MANHATTAN PSYCH. GROUP (Nov. 2023), <https://manhattanpsychologygroup.com/MPG-blog/understanding-masking-the-hidden-struggle-for-social-acceptance/>.

⁹⁷ From my experience, many events hosted for and by lawyers involve alcohol. K. Brooke Welch, *Why Your Legal Organization's Approach to Alcohol Impacts DEI-B*, ABA (Feb. 20, 2024), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/law_practice/resources/law-practice-today/2024/february-2024/why-your-legal-organizations-approach-to-alcohol-impacts-deib/.

⁹⁸ Emily Heird, *How to Drink Less Alcohol - Part One*, DICTA Mar. 2023 at 6 (on file with author).

to support and growth.⁹⁹ Ideally, lawyers and law students from all phases of life, *Flight* (the law student), *Desire* (lawyers in practice for two to five years), *Tree of Life* (lawyers in practice for seven or more years), and *Contemplation* (our elder lawyers) should be part of a community group. Exposure to all phases of life will assist in providing the group with different perspectives and insights.¹⁰⁰

I decided to test this supportive community theory. I gathered our faculty and administration and asked them to identify the local lawyer elders.¹⁰¹ These would be the lawyers in our community we all admire and wish to emulate for their hard work, positivity, empathy, and resilience. I wanted to expose our students to lawyers who love practicing law, who have suffered setbacks either personally or professionally in the past and have learned from their mistakes and the challenges of practice, and who are stronger for it.

I also asked for names of lawyers and alumni who are in the earlier stages of their career but could also be considered role models for our students. Those lawyers in the *Desire* stage (two to five years out of law school) can relate to our students since they recently passed the bar and started practicing and are finding ways to thrive amidst the stresses of learning to practice law. These lawyers also might benefit from the elders

⁹⁹ KOVALIK ET AL., *supra* note 38, at 13.4.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew Fox, an educator for forty-plus years, advocates for reinventing education where young and old people work together and learn from each other:

“First, it is so important at this time that young people and older people work together and learn from each other, that they pool their wisdom and their concerns. At this cusp between the modern and the post-modern worlds, the young hold the new *language* of imagery, computers, cybertechnology, media, DJ, VJ, and more. But it is the elders’ task to have imbibed some of the most important stories from the past and in so doing to provide some worthwhile *content*. It is the task of older ones to throw off the notion of retirement and take on the mantle of “refinement”; to move from the illusion that one’s late years are meant to be spent on golf courses and filling up restaurants or playing the stock market, and instead to give back to the younger generation. To give one must be working with. Elders and youth must work together today like never before to call up ancient wisdom and to create new wisdom for our common survival.”)

MATTHEW FOX, *THE A.W.E. PROJECT: REINVENTING EDUCATION*, 151 (2006).

¹⁰¹ My use of “elder” does not necessarily refer to age but the fact that they have significant experience in the legal profession, enjoy practicing, lead fulfilling lives, and are considered role models in the profession.

and distill messages that those in the *Flight* stage (the students) might understand. From that meeting, we created a list of approximately 50 lawyers.

The question was whether any of these extremely busy attorneys would agree to be a part of these small groups in the hope of building community and offering a space for reflection. The answer was a resounding yes. Thirty-five attorneys immediately responded to the call and agreed to put aside one entire workday to be trained as a group leader.¹⁰²

Why did they say yes? These attorneys were motivated for many reasons, including the desire to empower and motivate young professionals with tools and insights they might need to excel in Life and their legal careers, to help students find their calling and purpose in Life and achieve their goals, to share lessons learned and things they wish they had known, and to stay connected to the law school. Others wanted to improve the public perception of the legal profession after noticing a reduction in professionalism locally. The bottom line was they wanted to give back, make a difference in someone's Life, and quite simply, they wanted to connect outside the typical legal setting.

During the training, attorneys were taught how to facilitate group discussions and take the lead in sharing to promote vulnerability and authenticity within the group. To be clear, these are not group therapy sessions. Attorneys are not trained therapists. Lawyers can share lessons learned from past experiences and identify emotions associated with those experiences without the discussion being labeled group therapy.¹⁰³ Expressing emotion, while perhaps not a typical job description for most lawyers, is important for improved physical and mental health, stress management, building stronger relationships with others, and can lead to better decision-making. Whereas lawyers are known for their critical thinking skills and ability to analyze a case without exploring the emotional aspects (so as to not cloud their judgment), humans have been described as "emotional, feeling beings; who, on rare occasions, think."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Interview with Faculty, Lincoln Mem'l U. Duncan Sch. of L., in Knoxville, Tenn. (Aug. 16, 2024).

¹⁰³ One of my former students (now a general sessions judge) teased me when she saw my "feelings chart" poster I had created for the training. We as lawyers are reluctant to dive into the emotional realm (we tend to stick to the facts and logic) that I felt it important to list a variety of feelings outside the typical mad, sad, glad, and afraid vocabulary. Even within each general category of emotion, there is a distinction. For example, in the "mad" category, there is a difference between being irritated and being irate. See BRENE BROWN, *ATLAS OF THE HEART* 31-36 (2021) (examining the vocabulary around emotions).

¹⁰⁴ Toby Shapshak, *Internet Heroine Brené Brown Wows SXSW*, FORBES (Mar. 12, 2015), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/tobyshapshak/2016/03/12/internet-heroine-brene-brown-wows-sxsw/>, ("[W]hen something difficult happens, emotion is at the wheel. Cognition

What should attorneys and future attorneys reflect upon in these discussion groups? There is no set agenda, only suggested topics and guidelines. We wanted students to graduate from law school with a sense of who they are, who they want to be, what motivates them, and how they can align their values with their behaviors while practicing law. Ideally, we wanted students to avoid the angst that Michelle Obama and other lawyers experience when faced with the reality of practice. We wanted students to be intentional in their decisions and in their interactions with others and with themselves.

We wanted students to come up with their own Life strategies and articulate the following: “I have intentionally decided to be this person, and based upon who I am (my strengths, my weaknesses, my interests, and understanding the purpose of practicing law), I have decided to choose this path/position (at least in this moment). I am conscious of the consequences. And, I am going to use the skills and tools I have explored while in law school to experience a fulfilling life and professional career.”

If this is the underlying goal, we needed a general framework to get this type of self-reflection and action plan started. We decided to explore the values and behaviors associated with a thriving lawyer. We asked our faculty to weigh in, and they identified six key values deemed important in practicing law: self-awareness, integrity, resilience, empathy, excellence, and service.¹⁰⁵ Those six values became the initial topics for the discussion groups to examine.

and behavior are bound and gagged in the trunk and emotion is driving. Our brains are wired for survival and sadly ‘our brain still perceives emotional vulnerability as a threat.’”).

¹⁰⁵ As a faculty at Lincoln Memorial University Duncan School of Law, we created definitions for each value:

Self-awareness is our ability to see ourselves clearly; to observe and accurately identify our thoughts and emotions and what our body is feeling in the moment and to be aware of our strengths and weaknesses and how others see us.

Integrity is our ability to represent ourselves and our clients with uncompromisingly moral, ethical, and civil behavior, including in our communications and interactions with others, and to develop reputations for being honest in our word and fair in our actions.

Resilience is our ability to push forward and succeed despite uncontrollable circumstances, to recover from setbacks and view them as challenges rather than obstacles, and to have a growth mindset.

At a minimum, we asked each attorney-student discussion group to meet at least once a semester until the student graduates. My hope is that groups form a bond and want to meet on a regular basis to foster lasting friendships, authentically connect, and emulate a true community model.¹⁰⁶

These discussion groups are formed outside any course requirement.¹⁰⁷ It was important to keep these groups outside the classroom experience—away from the power dynamic between professor and student,¹⁰⁸ away from

Empathy is the ability to relate to another by understanding their experiences, perspective, and emotions while consciously guarding against biases.

Service is using our skills, knowledge, and leadership to benefit our clients, communities, people in need, the legal profession, and the administration of justice.

Excellence is holding ourselves to the highest standards of performance and behavior by being skilled at our craft and self-driven toward continuous learning and improvement in our profession.

¹⁰⁶ According to Matthew Fox:

Community is natural to ourselves and to the rest of nature. The word comes from two Latin words that mean “to share a common task.” In community, co-workers share a struggle to see compassion happen, including the shared celebration of life. Justice and creativity are integral to community. And cosmology names the most basic community of all. The modern era explored areas of individual rights and the dignity of the individual and that is knowledge well-attained. But for a postmodern time we must balance the individual with community once again, for humans are happiest in community where they share the most, whether it be the joys of life or the tragedies of life. Celebration and grief both find their outlet in community. And our ultimate moral responsibility is to pass on a world of beauty and health to communities that are not yet born but are promised to be born.

FOX, *supra* note 100, at 130-31.

¹⁰⁷ The minimum four attorney-student group meetings would be counted as four professionalism series credits. At LMU Law, students are required to attend at least eight events that are counted as professionalism series credits. *Graduation Requirements*, LINCOLN MEMORIAL U., <https://www.lmunet.edu/duncan-school-of-law/academics/graduation-requirements> (last visited Mar. 14, 2025).

¹⁰⁸ The power dynamic between student and professor (and the professor’s authoritative role in the classroom) can hinder vulnerability and authentic conversation when the professor is present, which is why this type of discussion needs to take place without professor input and outside the classroom. See Eloise Symonds, *An ‘Unavoidable’ Dynamic? Understanding the ‘Traditional’ Learner–Teacher Power Relationship Within a Higher Education Context*, 42 BRIT. J. SOCIO. EDU. 1070, 1076-79 (2021).

the “I have to do this to get a good grade” mentality, and away from the idea that this is just another classroom exercise that is a waste of my time. Law students need to move beyond the classroom and connect with their colleagues and lawyers in the community and transition into practice.

Just as in A.A. and other successful groups that foster community, these discussion groups need structure.¹⁰⁹ The Gibbs Reflective Cycle is a perfect base for creating a structure for the group to follow each time they meet.¹¹⁰ The model allows for six stages of reflection: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action plan. Individuals first share their experiences in the description and feelings phase and offer an initial self-evaluation of the experience. In the second phase, the group works together to identify the common issues the group is facing and share their thoughts in the analysis phase, and in the last phase, at the end of the meeting, everyone crafts their own action plan to work on. A simple three step structure to promote both group and individual growth and clarity. The next time the group meets, they start with a simple check-in and/or report back on the status of their action plans and share again on the next topic. In order to keep the group meeting to a reasonable amount of time,¹¹¹ the Gibbs cycle is shortened and structured into these three steps/phases:

A. STEP 1: Description and Feelings and Self-Evaluation

The sharer summarizes the experience they want to reveal to the group. What happened? Who was involved? When and where did this occur?¹¹² The sharer also expresses their feelings surrounding the experience. It is important to acknowledge both positive and negative emotions, as they significantly affect our interpretation of the event.¹¹³ The sharer then conducts a brief self-evaluation, assessing the good and bad aspects of the experience.¹¹⁴ What worked well, and what did not? What were the positive impacts and negative consequences?¹¹⁵ Each sharer should take no more

¹⁰⁹ ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, *supra* note 82.

¹¹⁰ Pihla Markkanen et al., *A Reflective Cycle: Understanding Challenging Situations in a School Setting*, 62 EDU. RSCH. 46, 53 (2020).

¹¹¹ Keeping in mind how precious time is, I would imagine a reasonable amount of time for a group discussion would be approximately 90 minutes (for between 6-7 group members to share and reflect and comment on others' experiences). I would recommend 30 minutes for each stage (individual sharing, group feedback, and individual take away plans).

¹¹² Paul Main, *Gibbs' Reflective Cycle*, STRUCTURAL LEARNING (May 9, 2023), <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/gibbs-reflective-cycle>.

¹¹³ *Id.* The following are my own examples: *How did you feel during that experience? What were the positive and negative feelings?*

¹¹⁴ *Id.* The following is my own example: *You just shared your experience, now share one good and bad aspect of it.*

¹¹⁵ *Id.*

than five minutes to describe their experience, share their feelings, and do an initial self-evaluation.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Examples of questions to reflect upon from the Successful Lawyer course taught at LMU Law include:

(1) Questions surrounding the value of self-awareness:

- Identify a time while in law school (or working in the legal profession) when you had an intense (or stressful) experience, and you did not regulate your emotions.
- How is self-awareness important to you as a human being and as a future lawyer?
- Give an example of when you have been distracted. What did you do to stay in the moment and what was the outcome?

(2) Questions surrounding the value of integrity:

- What are the habits or behaviors that demonstrate integrity? Give an example of how you've demonstrated those aspects in your professional career or in law school.
- How do you align your personal values with your professional actions?
- Think of a time when your integrity was telling you that this may not be the right thing to do. What did you do to resolve the question in your mind?
- Identify a time when you betrayed your values, how did it start? Identify a time when you messed up and violated your values. (i.e., staying quiet when I should have said something or I shouldn't have done this but I did it anyway). Or, integrity is doing the right thing when no one is looking – when did you not do the right thing because no one was looking?

(3) Questions surrounding the value of resilience:

- As a law student, identify a time when you were resilient in the face of stress, when you wanted to give up or give in but you kept going. What do you do to keep yourself going? What do you do when the going gets tough?
- What do you do in times of pending stress to prepare for the situation?
- What do you do to keep yourself going? What do you do when the going gets tough?

(4) Questions surrounding the value of empathy:

- Identify an experience where you were struggling, and someone showed you empathy. What did they do and how did it help?
- When you hear someone who has an opinion vastly different from your own, how do you stop yourself from being judgmental before you've heard their argument?

B. STEP 2: Group Analysis and Conclusion

In this step, we are looking for the group's input and feedback where we explore ideas and support each other in whatever the group members might be going through. In the analysis phase, the sharer and the rest of the group are digging deeper into understanding why things unfolded as they did. Lawyers can use their professional knowledge to interpret the experience and hopefully, help the group find commonalities and identify our common humanity.¹¹⁷ In the conclusion phase, the group determines what common threads resonate, what they could have done differently in their past experiences, and what they have learned from the experience and talking through it with others.¹¹⁸

This group feedback stage is the most difficult of the three stages. Group members must learn to provide feedback without providing advice, dominating the conversation, or attempting to fix problems. Giving advice ("You should do this") might alienate group members and defeat the purpose of offering a space for sharing and support. Providing guidelines to the group at this stage is critical, including furnishing them with language suggestions (using "I statements," such as "I can relate. . . would you like some ideas?").¹¹⁹

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- Tell us about a time when you prejudged somebody only to find out you were totally wrong.

¹¹⁷ Thomas Morawetz, *Self-Knowledge for Lawyers*, 68.1 J. L. EDU. 136, 137-39 (2018). A sample statement is: "I can relate because I had a similar situation." Also helpful for reflection: "What do you hear in one another that will help you support each other or what have you learned yourself from this discussion?"

¹¹⁸ John Heron & Peter Reason, *The practice of co-operative inquiry: Research 'with' rather than 'on' people*, HANDBOOK OF ACTION RESEARCH: CONCISE PAPERBACK EDITION 144-154 (2006). Sample questions include: What else could you have done differently? What conclusion have you drawn about yourself based on this discussion?).

¹¹⁹ Here are some of the giving effective feedback guidelines we provided:

- Your feedback should be: true, timely, necessary, and you must determine whether it can be heard by others.
- Describe what you see or observe instead of making an evaluation or giving your judgment.
- Be specific instead of general; specifics are helpful.
- Effective feedback provides information about that which can be controlled and changed otherwise, it only adds to frustration.
- Check out what the person you were giving feedback interpreted you as saying. Assumptions cause problems and can lead to hard feelings.
- Check out the validity of your feedback with others. Does your thinking about the information you shared seem rational to others?

C. STEP 3: Action Plan

In the action plan stage, each person in the group is given a few moments to develop a plan detailing what they will do if a similar situation arises in the future.¹²⁰ Developing an action plan is a commitment to use the knowledge and skills identified in the group to benefit the individual and the legal profession. They demonstrate efforts to hold yourself to high standards in performance and behavior by continuously learning and improving. This step is also critical because it allows for a concrete takeaway after pausing, processing, and reflecting. It allows us to grow and transform after reflecting on the past and acknowledging what is working and not working. The meeting can end any way that makes sense to the group, perhaps sharing action plans or reading their group's own "just cause."¹²¹

While this is merely an example of a structure as to what a lawyer-law student community meeting might look like, the benefits are endless. Where a classroom is used to impart knowledge and hopefully, keep students engaged while applying their critical thinking skills to answer questions from a case they read or work through a hypothetical scenario, a separate space to foster reflective practices and a sense of belonging is just as essential.¹²² Students will soon join the legal tribe and developing healthy

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- Do not overwhelm others with a lot of information. Offer your feedback in small pieces.
 - Share your feedback with others in a way that makes it easy for them to listen to what it is you want to express.
 - Relate to information and feelings shared without refocusing the discussion onto yourself.
 - Do not provide advice unless it is requested or unless you determine if a person is open to it (I have an idea, would you like to hear it?)

These suggestions are based upon guidelines created by Dr. Jo Wiley in her social work courses she teaches at the University of Tennessee.

¹²⁰ Barbara Hayes-Roth & Frederick Hayes-Roth, *A cognitive model of planning*, 3.4 COGNITIVE SCI. 275-310 (1979). An example question is: "What are you going to do moving forward?"

¹²¹ SINEK, *supra* note 65, at 39.

¹²² This group model in no way is meant to take away from the benefit of reflection exercises offered in many law course settings, such as in skills courses, academic success activities, externship classes, legal clinical settings, and even self-reflection exercises post-midterm and final exams in doctrinal courses. This group model offers students a setting outside a course requirement with no learning agenda other than to share and support others – to learn more about themselves, that they are not unique in life's challenges, and that there is a benefit in learning from past mistakes. This group model is also an alternative to traditional one-on-one mentoring. Oftentimes, mentoring can turn into a simple networking exercise where a student is focused on gathering contacts for future employment and less upon developing a meaningful relationship where the mentor truly supports, advises, and serves as a source of inspiration.

habits while in law school will carry them throughout practice. Not only do they need to feel like they belong, but they will also be the future agents of change in the profession.

The group approach to reflective practice promotes universality (I am not alone), allows for a social learning experience, instills hope and camaraderie in the profession, and allows for information to be imparted, particularly from older, wiser attorneys to the younger attorneys and students.

The elders in the group must lead by example by being vulnerable, self-reflective, honest, and demonstrating integrity. The elders should take on a facilitator/leader role by asking questions, sitting back, and validating the group's thoughts, feelings, and assessments.¹²³ Elders should listen to themes and commonalities in the stories and tie them back to the practice of law. Lastly, elders should encourage students to be their best selves so they can become successful lawyers with fulfilling lives. If only Michelle Obama and thousands of recovering attorneys like her had found a legal community to support them and validate their experiences and feelings. "What kind of person do I want to be? How do I want to contribute to the world?"¹²⁴

V. THE BUY-IN

If I had a message to my contemporaries, it is surely this: Be anything you like, be madmen, drunks, and bastards of every shape and form, but at all costs avoid one thing: success . . . If you are too obsessed with

¹²³ These were the group leader expectations articulated at the training:

- Leaders may interrupt to keep us on track and help us follow guidelines.
- Leaders will keep time.

Leaders will:

- Lead by example by being vulnerable, self-reflective, honest and demonstrate integrity;
- Ask questions and validate the group's thoughts, feelings, and assessments;
- Listen to themes and pull them together and tie them to the practice of law; and
- Encourage students to be their best self so they can be successful lawyers with fulfilling lives.

Interview with Dr. Jo Willey, Therapist and Professor at the College of Social Work at the University of Tennessee (July 24, 2024).

¹²⁴ OBAMA, *supra* note 36, at 132.

*success, you will forget to live. If you have learned only how to be a success, your Life has probably been wasted.*¹²⁵

—Thomas Merton

Lawyers are obsessed with success—success in the courtroom, in the boardroom, in the office, in finding clients, etc. After the ABA passed curricular standards that required law schools to “provide substantial opportunities to students for . . . the development of a professional identity,”¹²⁶ we decided to call our first-year professional identity course, “The Successful Lawyer.” Because what young law student does not want to be successful in their legal career? It is critical to have buy-in from the audience or no one will listen.¹²⁷

But as Thomas Merton points out, what we have traditionally defined as “success” leads us down a path focused on external factors and feeling empty inside.¹²⁸ True success and survival in a profession filled with stress and adversity come from a connection to self and to a community, a desire for self-reflection, and a deep sense of purpose and meaning. But how do we get lawyers and law students to hear this message if these are words of wisdom few understand until they reach the *Contemplation* phase of their life?

¹²⁵ THOMAS MERTON, LOVE AND LIVING (Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart eds., 1979), in *Thomas Merton Quotes*, GOODREADS, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/769961-if-i-had-a-message-to-my-contemporaries-it-is> (last visited Apr. 8, 2025).

¹²⁶ American Bar Association, ABA Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools 2024-2025, Standard 303(b)(3), https://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_education/resources/standards/. According to the ABA, “professional identity focuses on what it means to be a lawyer and the special obligations lawyers have to their clients and society. The development of a professional identity should involve an intentional exploration of the values, guiding principles, and well-being practices considered foundational to successful legal practice.” American Bar Association, Interpretation 303-5, in ABA Standards and Rules of Procedure for Approval of Law Schools 2024-2025, https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/standards/2024-2025/2024-2025-standards-chapter-3.pdf. See also Joshua Aaron Jones, *Implementing ABA Standard 303 (b)(3): Positive Legal Education Through a Community of Inquiry*, 48 VT. L. REV. 564, 577 (2023).

¹²⁷ Lisle R. Baker, *Exploring Well-Being Practices as Part of Law Student Development of a Positive Professional Identity*, 58 WAKE FOREST L. REV. 821 (2023). This is particularly so in this case since students have a bias towards doctrinal classes, thinking soft skills and values discussions are less important or a waste of time.

¹²⁸ THOMAS MERTON, LOVE AND LIVING (Naomi Burton Stone & Brother Patrick Hart eds., 1979), in *Thomas Merton Quotes*, GOODREADS, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/769961-if-i-had-a-message-to-my-contemporaries-it-is> (last visited Apr. 8, 2025).

The ABA identified law schools as key players in improving not only law student well-being but lawyer well-being also.¹²⁹ In response, law schools across the country launched professional identity-type courses with the intent that students reflect on what it means to be a lawyer, examine some of the foundational values of the legal profession,¹³⁰ and explore a variety of well-being practices. But this endeavor is, in the words of Thomas Merton, “wasted,” if law students are unwilling to receive the message.

A student’s perplexed reaction to such a message (Connection? Community? Purpose? The True Self? What?) is understandable. How are these concepts going to help me get a job in the legal field? How is this course going to help me pass the bar? Students in the *Flight* phase are understandably focused on immediate, short-term goals: getting a summer law job or externship, learning the laws discussed in doctrinal courses, developing critical thinking skills to get a good grade on the exam, and studying for the bar exam. Students want to learn how to write a decent cover letter and resume, how to interview and dress professionally, and how to network and establish contacts to help them find a job. These are all important skills for the short term.

If we want to change the overall satisfaction and well-being rate of those in the legal profession, we must play the long game and focus on long-term goals. We need to find a way to convince those in the *Flight*, *Desire*, and *Tree of Life* phases that success is found by looking within and playing the long game.¹³¹ Oftentimes, it seems like we have to experience a significant setback in our lives before we surrender and look within to find the answers. Many times, that is done alone without the support of friends and family and without the help of established practices already in place to process that pain. At some point in their career, most lawyers have experienced feelings of overwhelm and languishing—too many cases, not enough time, too many deadlines, too many unrealistic expectations of clients, supervisors, judges, or failing to achieve the desired promotion at work. Add on top of that a death in the family, a divorce, a child custody or fertility issue, anxiety, or depression because you are working too much to find time for love or friendship. It usually takes a Life-altering setback and the ache of suffering to spark change, growth, and transformation. Is it possible to circumvent the

¹²⁹ New Study on Lawyer Well-Being Reveals Serious Concerns for Legal Profession, ABA (Dec. 2017), <https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/publications/youraba/2017/december-2017/secrecy-and-fear-of-stigma-among-the-barriers-to-lawyer-well-being/>. The National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being recommended that the ABA “require law schools to create well-being education as a criterion for ABA accreditation.” James C. Coyle, *The Report of the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being*, 87.2 BAR EXAMINER 9 (2018).

¹³⁰ At our law school, the faculty adopted core LMU Law values – self-awareness, integrity, resilience, empathy, service, and excellence – to create a common language and culture around the values foundational to legal practice.

¹³¹ SINEK, *supra* note 65, at 124.

suffering and recognize the value of exploring these topics, concepts, and both self and group examinations on the front end?

Imagine if we could provide our law students and fledgling lawyers with basic reflective practices and a community with whom they could talk things out *BEFORE* the suffering begins. Perhaps lawyers could make better choices, feel fulfilled, and not feel the need to leave the profession as so many recovering attorneys have done. The ones who need this the most (those in *Flight*) are the ones who will resist the message the most. For many at this stage of their lives, this message is irrelevant—the suffering has not yet occurred.

The answer to this dilemma will come not from what is taught in the classroom but from the lawyer elders who have already experienced both joy and suffering in the profession and have not only survived but now live balanced, fulfilled lives. These are the lawyers who are flourishing and are now willing to share and connect with others and help others find their own way in the profession.

Do you want to be another miserable and overworked attorney? Do you want the benefit of age and wisdom now? Listen to your elders and do the work to connect within and find the path that will work for you.

V. CONCLUSION

Neo, sooner or later you're going to realize just as I did that there's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.

—Morpheus, in *The Matrix*¹³²

After I co-taught the Successful Lawyer course for the first time, I met with two student assessment teams who had evaluated the course and had written a report advocating for certain changes to be made to the course. During the meeting, one student commented that the field trip to the Knoxville Museum of Art had been a complete waste of time. I asked the group if anyone remembered what the topic of the class session had been. One student raised their hand and said, “I believe it was self-awareness.” Before the field trip, I had spent ninety minutes discussing what makes up the self (thoughts, emotions, body) and the identities that make up the self. I had discussed what self-awareness means—our ability to observe and accurately identify our thoughts and emotions and what our body is feeling in the moment. We had students discuss with their neighbors how high levels of self-awareness are a benefit for lawyers and how we can practice

¹³² THE MATRIX (Warner Bros. 1999).

self-awareness. Once we explored these concepts, I told them it was important to apply these concepts in a real-world setting.

Students were asked to walk to the KMA (less than a mile away), put their cell phones away, and in small groups, choose an art piece to focus on, and answer certain questions that would guide them in a mindful art practice.¹³³ Students were to take time to pause and look at the work of art (Observe), then talk about what they see in the art (Describe), interpret and assign meaning to the art (Process), and then relate what they see to their own life, or to other works of art or images they have seen (Connect and Reflect).¹³⁴

I immediately realized from the student's comment and several head nods that I had failed in my class objective. They had stopped listening to my lecture on self-awareness after five minutes, and I don't blame them. Studies show that mind wandering can occur as soon as 30 seconds after a lecture has begun—the human brain simply cannot pay attention.¹³⁵ The students also lacked the reflective thinking skills to process how this museum experience was meant to practice self-awareness and experience being in the moment. Again, I don't blame them—reflective thinking is rarely taught in school. Some found a topic like self-awareness to be irrelevant and superfluous because this was not a doctrinal class, and we were not talking about laws they could memorize and regurgitate for a future exam. Again, I don't blame them—that is how law schools assess their merit and what employers care to evaluate.

I can try again. I can try to explain self-awareness in five minutes or less and why we are going to the museum to look at art. I can have them read the museum instructions out loud to the group before they begin the exercise. I can make a short and funny video about being in the moment and trying it out at the museum. I can design additional interactive exercises to encourage self-awareness and create a more active learning environment. But the bottom line is there is only so much you can do in the classroom. The distractions, the early educational habits, and endless to-do lists make it difficult for true learning to occur and for the message to stick.

That said, the seeds can be planted in the classroom, waiting for the moment they are noticed to be given water and room to grow. It is time to

¹³³ For further details on the mindful art exercise and the specific questions to be answered, please contact the author.

¹³⁴ *Cycle of Life: Within the Power of Dreams and the Wonder of Infinity*, KNOXVILLE MUSEUM OF ART (2024), <https://knoxart.org/exhibitions/cycle-of-life/>.

¹³⁵ Spencer Kagan, *Kagan Structures, Processing, and Excellence in College Teaching*, 25 J. ON EXCELLENCE IN COLL. TEACHING 119, 121 (2014) (describing several studies which suggest “mind-wandering occurs 30% of the time or more in every waking activity save lovemaking” and that mind-wandering “occurs across a diverse variety of tasks between 15% and 50% of the time”).

bring in the elders and the lawyer community to disrupt and adjust the young birds' flight. If the wise advice and elder practices are shared with the birds, and a sense of community grows among the flock, there just might be fewer "recovering" attorneys and more fulfilled, optimistic attorneys, ready to share their moments of transformation with the younger ones. The seeds will finally take root.