

YOUNG LAWYERS

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TAKE TIME FOR YOURSELF

“He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And if you gaze long into an abyss, the abyss also gazes into you.” – Nietzsche

I have had this famous quote often offered as advice in my career as an assistant prosecutor and criminal defense attorney. At first I did not give it much thought, but as time passes I have come to think more about this quote especially as I transition back into the prosecutor’s office.

The practice of law is tough for a lot of reasons. First of all, it’s an adversarial system. I explain it to my non-lawyer friends as such; “Imagine you are trying to paint your bedroom walls white, while someone is simultaneously painting the walls blue.” That’s just for starters. Second, we often get people on the worst day of their lives. Sometimes these clients have done terrible things or made a hardly forgivable mistake. Third, the time pressures are very real and unrelenting. Most lawyers cannot make time to do research and writing

during business hours. Instead, relying on early mornings, late nights and weekends to try to keep up. This takes away from our civic responsibilities and precious time from our families. Lastly, it’s a business. We have to make sure we are compensated for our efforts to protect our clients. My worst days are when I have to tell someone “no” and it isn’t based on the merits of the case, but the lack of compensation.

What do all these stressors do to lawyers? Without getting into all the statistics, it is widely known, and accepted, that lawyers are subject to depression, divorce and substance abuse at a rate higher than the normal population. Is it really a mystery what are the root causes? Absolutely not.

What must be done about it? Collectively, members of the Bar should take time to familiarize themselves with the Lawyers Assistance Program (LAP) provided by the West Virginia State Bar. This invaluable service helps lawyers, “identify and address problems with alcoholism, other drug addictions

and mental health disorders.” Robert Albury is the new executive director and will pick up right where George Daugherty left off, which is to provide the above confidential services. This **confidentiality** is for any individual lawyer that calls and to family members or friends that may call to report a suspicion that a lawyer is facing these challenges.

Think about the value of this service. Most of us have had an experience with another lawyer that caused us to question if something was amiss. Everybody is entitled to a bad day but you know it when you see it. How many of us are guilty of not saying something? I know I am and I know I am not alone. It’s easy to feel as if it’s “none of my business” but really we fail to act because we don’t know what to do, not because we don’t care for that person. The LAP program solves that dilemma. Call when you have a concern. Call when you have a question. Just call. Early intervention is a key to success.

Looking out for fellow lawyers will be easy; our jobs are to take care of others. The real challenge will be looking out for number one. It's the hardest thing for a lot of reasons as we are often our own toughest critics while underestimating our own problems. That's why the LAP program is so invaluable; it gives our friends and colleagues a way to help without fear of alienating a relationship.

I think the surest and best ways to avoid the pitfalls that exist as a lawyer are simple. Maintain balance. I often give this profound piece of advice to young lawyers but do not dare offer what their balance should look like, but I do offer a general framework. For me, nothing is better than waking up at an unreasonable hour to brave the frigid cold in pursuit of a big buck or hungry trout. Anyone who shares this passion will tell you that heaven must be a lot like being in the woods at daybreak on the Monday before Thanksgiving. Any outside interest that you can lose yourself in is important to finding balance. TV or surfing the internet is not an appropriate substitute. No one on their deathbed wishes they would have watched more TV or spent more time on Facebook.

Spend time with your family. There is nothing more important. They need you more than your clients.

Cultivate relationships outside of the office. This can be with friends in a social setting or working with an organization like a nonprofit that will really appreciate your contributions as a lawyer. The bond to your community will go a long way to maintaining a positive mindset.

Also, take care of yourself. Eat well and exercise. A strong body helps a mind stay strong. Your clients depend on a lawyer firing on all cylinders. Good health will make everything in your life better.

I realize these are obvious suggestions that are universally understood, but taking the time to be mindful of the simple things will go a long way in maintaining a proper balance. We will serve our clients, community, family and friends better by being better to ourselves. Our duty to the profession will be served if we also look out for one another.

Thinking back to Nietzsche's quote, it's clear that a person should be careful to avoid becoming something they hate. Familiarity can quickly turn to sympathy. This is the time that lawyers often become vulnerable to the pressures of the practice and engage in harmful behaviors. The good news is that your State Bar has a free and confidential service that is a phone call away. **WVL**



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