

Lesson 12



THREE THINGS I WISH I'D REMEMBERED AT THE START OF MY PRACTICE

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Nothing can bring you peace but yourself.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Practicing mindfulness and meditation were part of my childhood. I grew up in a family of communicators, counselors, and wonderful people who support their communities. I always wanted to help people; the question was how. Before I practiced law, I worked in professional theater. While maybe not a traditional pre-law profession, theater ignited my desire to pursue the law.

When I started law school, I knew I wanted to be there—I was there to help people. And I knew it would be hard. What I didn't know was that I would question being there. I didn't know how I would be helping people. And I didn't know how hard it would be.

When I am asked how I found my path or how I ended up interested in my current area of practice, electronic discovery, I respond that I found an area that engaged me and ran with it. When I am asked how I balance work and life, I explain that it isn't easy. I don't always find balance, which is OK.

PASSION: HOW IT CAN HELP YOU FIND YOUR PATH.

I remember when someone asked me, “Did you ever think you would be here?” My answer was, “It depends.” Did they mean: (1) here as a lawyer, (2) here at my firm, or (3) here in a management role? The answer to all those

questions is “yes.” They weren’t the first and they won’t be the last person to ask if I am surprised that I am where I am. I’m not surprised to be where I am because I learned a secret early on, one that sometimes I forget along the way. I am the only one who can maintain my path. I was diagnosed in first grade with dyslexia. I never let that stop me from meeting my goals and making my own path in life. Passion has always guided me to my chosen path.

Simplistic in theory, monumental in practice. Other legal professionals have told me they don’t know if they want to do “this” anymore. Hell, I’ve been there, too. What is often forgotten about passion is that it doesn’t always burn bright every day. There will be days that you hate what you do. Passion keeps you going on those days. The path to legal passion was clear as mud for me. I graduated law school not knowing what I “wanted to do.” My work with indigent clients steered me toward plaintiffs’ litigation. Life, however, is not binary. I started at a boutique law firm (where I work to this day) that afforded me the opportunity to experience all aspects of practice.

When I found my passion, I also found my path. I took what kept me motivated and interested in electronic discovery and used it to develop my career. I took a passion and ran with it. You can, too.

PATIENCE: PRACTICE IT EVERY DAY.

You are not going to like everyone. Everyone is not going to like you. It is as simple as that. The lesson to learn is how not to outwardly show that dislike, and to practice stepping back and being mindful of others. In my pre-law life, I didn’t contemplate the rigors involved in working at an office. Anyone who works in an office can understand these. I found myself forgetting early lessons about dealing with myself and others. Stress played a starring role in my early career. I found myself behaving in ways that were not normal for me. I forgot to practice patience. I sniped at others over trivial matters. I forgot to practice mindful breathing and meditation because I was “too busy.”

It is never intentional to forget the lessons we learn about human interactions, but as humans, stress often guides our behavior. This was the case for me until one work trip when I found myself telling another attorney who was feeling excess stress about how growing up I was taught about mindfulness and the importance of practicing meditation. We talked mindful breathing and focusing your thoughts back to a quiet place. I was reminded of something I heard when I was in grade school: “[w]hatever the tasks, do them slowly and with ease, in mindfulness.” It wasn’t until much later in life that I came across

that quote in a book by Thich Nhat Hanh called *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*. This simple idea is one that I had to rediscover. The lessons that were a fundamental part of who I was were so easy to share with someone else. I had just forgotten them for myself. Stress doesn't go away, but taking stress out on yourself and others isn't the answer, either.

After that trip, I started to focus back on being an active listener and meditation. I opened myself back up to the understanding that everyone has more happening in their life than what I was seeing. This rediscovered philosophy refocused my agitated energy back to mindful energy. My stress dropped, and I was more focused. Now, I take proactive steps to manage my stress. I encourage you to do the same.

PEOPLE: FIND THEM. CONNECT WITH THEM. SPEND TIME WITH THEM.

Finding people is different for everyone. I found “my people” by reconnecting with lifelong friends, one of whom is now my husband. I found my people by spending time outside of work with colleagues who have become my friends. I found my people by staying in touch with my family. Humans need other humans. Our profession has a lot of causalities, especially when it comes to relationships. The only way to find people is to put yourself out there. Take a chance on yourself. Burnout is real, so make sure to take time for an adventure. I had forgotten this.

You need people in your life. You need your family. You need friends. You need colleagues. And you need to spend time with them outside of work. As attorneys, we often find ourselves “at work” more than we are at home. I found myself living my work most of my waking hours. Sometimes, I still live my work at odd hours of the night when I wake up worrying about this or that. But, the difference is now I practice turning work off when I'm at home (or at least reducing the impact work has on my home time). It is true—you need to find a balance between work and life.

When I started practicing full time, like so many other first-year associates, I felt I had to eat, breathe, and live my work 24/7. To some extent, this is true. But like so many others, I let my work affect my relationships outside of work. For me, the change came when my now-husband and I started taking extended vacations each summer. At first, I felt guilty being away from the office. On one of these trips I read a study about lawyer burnout, and it clicked for me. I couldn't stay on 24/7. I needed people in my life. I needed adventures. I needed to be out of the office.

NORA RIVA BERGMAN

I leave you with one final piece of advice: What works for me may not work for you. And that is OK. In the words of Abraham Lincoln, “I do the very best I know how – the very best I can; and I mean to keep doing so until the end.” So should you. That is how you find your path. That is how you find your passion, your peace and, more often than not, your people.

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