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### Preparing Law Students for Meaningful, Healthy Lives as Lawyers

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## Preparing law students for meaningful, healthy lives as lawyers

By **Bari Burke**, professor  
University of Montana  
School of Law

I write to ask for your suggestions for enabling law students to prepare for meaningful, healthy, and dedicated lives as lawyers.

That is the purpose of my seminar at the law school called “Lawyers’ Values, Lives, and

Work.” This seminar results from a collaboration, in 2000, between former Dean Jack Mudd and me, at the invitation of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching which was, and still is, engaged in a multi-year study of legal education as part of its “Program on Preparation for the Professions.”

As we thought about the course, we agreed that law schools generally, and ours in particular, press students to acquire both the specialized knowledge and the lawyering skills necessary to think and perform as competent lawyers. On the other hand, we believed that law schools need to do more to prepare students to become lawyers fully and honorably engaged by law practice and equipped to choose and adopt the habits necessary to live meaningful and healthy lives in that practice.

Our specific thesis was that “professionalism” (I will ask for help in defining this term in a later column), physical and emotional health, and life satisfaction are closely linked and that legal education does not sufficiently prepare graduates to recognize or respond in healthy ways to the conflicting values and consequent pressures of professional life. Thus, the seminar investigates the subject of values (explicit and implicit) in the legal profession, the values implicit in the current culture of legal practice, and the personal values lawyers bring to their practice.

We explored with our students four particular questions:

- (1) What are the sources of lawyers’ meaning and satisfaction, as well as stress (I will ask for help in defining this term in a later column on dissatisfaction in professional life)?
- (2) In what ways do law schools and the profession transmit professional values and attitudes and create among law students a commitment to those values?
- (3) What values and attitudes do law students need to cultivate personally to find meaning and satisfaction in their professional lives, and what practices and habits must they develop to be able to protect their chosen values and attitudes in the face of potentially conflicting values?

- (4) What potential does legal education have to prepare students to flourish as professionals?

**WE CAUTIONED** students at the beginning of the course that they would need to consider deeply personal questions during the course:

- What are your personal values?
- How would you describe yourself as a law student?
- How would others describe you?
- What sustains you and brings you satisfaction as a law student?
  - Who or what gets in your way in finding law school satisfying?
  - Since beginning law school have you asked yourself whether law school feels right for you?
  - Do you have any hesitations about becoming a lawyer?
  - What qualities and habits do you want as a professional?
  - How do you, and will you, live up to your personal and professional values and goals?

Ungraded writing assignments include: (1) a paper asking students to explore and identify their essential values as they relate to their lives as lawyers, “Who am I – this person who is about to become a lawyer?”; (2) a paper asking students to explain their present vision of their professional and personal lives in ten years; and (3) a letter of recommendation for themselves that honestly presents their sense of their values, attitudes, and behavior that will suit them to practice law.

Then, to help students discover first-hand what Montana lawyers think about their lives as lawyers and the sources of meaning and satisfaction, as well as stress in their practices, each student interviews a practicing attorney and writes a paper reflecting on that interview. How has that interview helped students to put themselves in the position of a lawyer and begin to form a professional identity?

**THE STUDENTS READ** a variety of books (e.g., Steven Keeva, “Transforming Practices” (1999); Walter Bennett, “The Lawyer’s Myth: Reviving Ideals in the Legal Profession” (2001); and David Hilfiker, “Healing Our Wounds: A Physician Looks at His Work” (1998/2003)). They also read and articles primarily from bar journals and law reviews on such broad topics as the fundamental traditional and current values and environments of the legal profession, as well as particular topics such as billable hours, balance or equilibrium between professional and personal time, making and learning from mistakes, and procrastination and perfectionism.

Although I lost Jack Mudd as a full partner in 2002 because

he began extensive out-of-state travel, I have continued to teach the course annually. Each time I teach the course, I have invited several lawyers to join various class sessions. At the end of each course, I invite the participating lawyers and students to suggest additional topics or readings or other ideas for improving the course. They do so freely.

Now I'd like to solicit you, lawyers throughout the state, to become my partners in this course by continuing a conversation already started among members of the bar about this large area called "professionalism." In a later column, I'll present a list of the various possible components of that elusive term and ask for your thoughts.

**THE EDITORS** of *The Montana Lawyer* have generously agreed to allow me to write a series of columns that raise specific topics and ask for your advice and help which I can then take into the classroom and share with our students. I also want to be able to promise students that I will bring their concerns back to you through this series of columns. Some columns will look at the medical profession (including medical education) and their responses to calls for increased professionalism and ask if you find any of those responses appropriate for legal education. I more often plan to ask for your responses to questions more directly connected to the practice of law.

For this initial effort, would you please respond to the following "hypothetical":

*You are the guest speaker during a class session. A student poses the following question: What, in particular, about the practice of law is satisfying or meaningful to you?*

Please send your responses by e-mail or street mail to:

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**Street address:** School of Law,  
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**Office phone:** (406) 243-4252

## LETTERS

### Grateful for attorney's pro bono help

I am writing to convey my deep appreciation for the pro bono work of a Missoula attorney, Jane E. Cowley of Worden Thane PC, and what she did for a long-time staff member of the Poverello Center, Inc.

I have honestly never been more impressed with another professional. She represents the legal profession with integrity and with the spirit of service to others.

As Western Montana's largest homeless shelter and soup kitchen and a 501(c)3 non profit, we are constantly fundraising and grant writing to meet our expenses. Our dedicated, loving staff is unwavering as they serve the underprivileged in Missoula, but they are certainly not compensated financially as much as they deserve. Ms. Cowley's generosity in assisting one of our long-term employees was beyond the call of duty

Our employee is a hard-working single mother of two young children. She attends the University of Montana and works at the Poverello Center full time. Because she could not afford to retain counsel, she had taken great individual initiative in working with legal aid and representing herself in her divorce.

However, she understandably felt let down by the legal system and confused by the process when despite her efforts and orders from the court, she was getting no response or correspondence from the attorney representing her ex-husband. The attorney missed multiple court appearances and months went by with no child support.

From the moment we asked for assistance, Ms. Cowley immediately stepped in, comforted her, explained procedure, and assisted her with filings. Her actions single-handedly changed her and her children's lives.

The Poverello Center Inc, as ever, belongs to this community. Ms. Cowley's support and the support of Worden Thane have demonstrated that at the highest level.

Ms. Cowley should be commended for serving her profession with compassion and integrity. It is an honor to have met her.

*- Ellie Hill, executive director,  
Poverello Center Inc.  
Missoula*



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