

Reclaiming Purpose: Our Students' and Our Own

By Daisy Hurst Floyd

Over the last three years, I have asked law students to help me discover the ways in which legal education affects their transformation into lawyers. My goal is to better understand the ways in which law students develop their professional identities and is spurred in part by the current crisis of meaning in the profession. What seeds do we sow in law school that are manifested, both positively and negatively, in the profession? To the extent that we are sowing the seeds for negative professional experiences, what can we do to mitigate that effect?

The most revealing – and most troubling – answer is that law school causes students to lose the sense of purpose that made them want to be lawyers. The loss is not only harmful to individual students, but it also has enormous negative consequences for the profession and for those served by the profession.

This realization was first brought home to me during a class discussion about the third year of law school. Third-year students described feeling apathetic, even paralyzed, about their legal studies and their futures as lawyers. Several described their journey from excitement about beginning law school to their disappointment with the reality of law school and their resulting perception of law practice. A second-year student, who had been listening attentively, suddenly spoke up: “It’s like the grief process,” she said. “Hearing their stories is like listening to the ways in which one moves through the stages of the grief process: there is loss, then denial, then mourning, then anger, then acceptance. The third-years have arrived at the acceptance stage. They have accepted that what they thought this was all about is not accurate. It’s turned out to be different from what they hoped.” As she spoke, there were murmurs of recognition and assent, along with some laughter at such a grim metaphor for the law school experience. We pursued her construct: If the students thought she was accurate about the grief process, what was the loss they had experienced? What loss had been grieved and now accepted as gone, what had they had at one point that was now dead?

Over time, my students have offered an answer: They recount losing the sense of purpose – their visions of what it means to be a lawyer – that brought them to law school. Not only have students been able to articulate the loss of this vision, but they have repeatedly described the loss as quick and traumatic, very much akin to a death, reinforcing the aptness of the grief metaphor.

Students come to law school with an idea that being a lawyer is something meaningful, something important and valuable. They are drawn to a vision that includes a job undertaken in relationship with and on behalf of other people, helping clients to solve problems or to move through difficult times. While they may not have a detailed or even realistic picture of what lawyers do, students envision themselves engaged in professional work that is intellectually challenging and that has value and meaning. They arrive at law

school with hope and expectation that their work as lawyers will have a positive impact for society as a whole. For many, the external rewards may also provide an incentive, but those are the only incentives for very few. It has become quite clear to me that my students want to feel good about what they do professionally, which requires that their work give them something beyond the superficial benefits of money and prestige.

Upon beginning law school, students quickly learn that law school values rational, objective analysis to the exclusion of other qualities, such as self-awareness and interpersonal relationships. They also learn that winning – as measured by the prizes of grades, law review membership, and certain jobs – is the most important goal. They believe that they must adopt those values as part of their changing professional identities. They believe that their personal visions of lawyering are naïve and unrealistic. As a result, students replace their hopeful expectations for their work lives with minimal expectations for finding meaning and purpose in their work. They will accept unfulfilling work environments because they think that there is no other option.

These reduced expectations impose a terrible burden on new lawyers as they begin their professional lives. If we as legal educators are contributing to that burden, we are failing our students and our profession. We must find a way to correct that failure.

The question, of course, is how to do so. My students have helped me begin to see some possible ways.

The first is that students are helped by strengthening or developing skills of self-awareness and reflection. I have used a variety of techniques to stimulate reflection. They include written essays, brief in-class reflective exercises, participation in a Web-based discussion board, class discussion, and longer experiential or research papers. I have also used the Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicator as one method of discussing the importance of self-awareness and understanding of others.

Some students come to law school with skills of self-awareness and reflection; others do not. The time demands of law school, the competitive environment, and the emphasis on analytical reasoning devalue self-awareness and prevent reflection. Yet, these are essential skills for finding meaning and purpose in law practice, as well as for forming and sustaining relationships.

Similarly, students report positive outcomes from opportunities to develop connections with each other and with lawyers and other professionals. In some classes, I have hosted weekend retreats with students and between five and eight professionals, lawyers, and others (e.g., a doctor, journalist, ethicist, and psychologist). The retreats have offered time for intensive discussion on a variety of topics as well as for informal interaction. Additionally, lawyers and others have participated as guest speakers, in person or through electronic means. I have also brought lawyers into the classroom vicariously through fiction and nonfiction works, including biographies. Because many law students feel isolated, students report surprise and relief upon learning that their reactions to law school are similar to those of other students. This realization was particularly helpful in

demonstrating to students that anxieties and even fear are normal parts of becoming and being a professional and not indicative of incompetence, as many had perceived in their isolation.

Additionally, students are reassured by hearing lawyers discuss their own successful searches for meaning in their professional lives and for achieving balance and integration of their professional and personal lives. They are relieved to hear professionals talk of dealing with fear and of making mistakes and correcting them. We have had intensive and energetic discussions of whether it is realistic to view work as a calling, as defined by Frederick Buechner: “The place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Meeting lawyers whom they admire and who are interesting and enjoyable to be with is reassuring to students, helping to mitigate the negative public perception of lawyers. One student’s comment about the interactions with professionals is illustrative: They offered, the student said, “insight to people starving for guidance, hope, and reassurance.”

A number of students report a reclaimed sense of purpose from these experiences. From one student: “I walked away...feeling as though I did make the right decision by choosing this as a career path.” From another: “I want to be the same person at work that I am within myself. I don’t want to sacrifice my values or passions because my job requires it...I now have more pride to enter the legal profession and to defend the profession. I also feel more optimistic about the practice of law.” From a third, discussing a new perspective on the practice of law: “This perception allowed me to be much more hopeful toward the profession I’ve chosen to enter.... No longer is the path afforded attorneys riddled with traps and hazards by which I may fall victim. No longer does the profession look like a battlefield, riddled with the victims of the poor tactical and strategic choices made during the various battles and wars in which we fight. Instead, it is a picture of which Forrest Gump, ever willing to be only himself, would be proud.”

As so often happens when we teach, my efforts to help students learn have resulted in my learning. In setting out to understand lawyers’ development of professional identity, my own professional identity has changed. I learned about myself, engaged in reflection about the appropriate role of legal education and educators, and connected in new ways with my students and with professionals who were brought into the teaching enterprise. As I truly listened to students’ reflections about their learning, their inner lives, and their professional and personal concerns, I developed a greater appreciation for the depth and complexity of their lives. I see them differently, which has broadened my vision of what it means to be a law professor, just as I was attempting to broaden their visions of what it means to be a lawyer. Thanks to my students, I have reclaimed my purpose as a teacher.

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