

Enduring Happiness for Attorneys? Your law firm's culture holds the key to your own peace of mind

I started my law practice more than 40 years ago. In that time, I've met more successful attorneys than I can count—with very few happy ones among them.

That's not to say that we lawyers are incapable of experiencing happiness. But the happiness I'm referring to is not limited to peak career experiences, like nailing a big verdict or discovering that a particularly irksome adversary has been written up by the Disciplinary Board. I'm referring to a happiness that isn't "event driven" but rather lies at the foundation of all our experiences, irrespective of which way the verdict goes.

HOW MUCH HAPPINESS IS REALLY POSSIBLE?

Living in such enduring happiness may sound unrealistic to those engaged in our high stakes, conflict-ridden legal profession. And even if we have the audacity to envision such a state of equanimity, we've probably concluded that achieving this "baseline" of happiness would require heroic efforts that are beyond what we have the time or willingness to invest. It is understandable, then, that many in our profession have decided that our best hope is to experience enough happy moments to get us through our stress-filled legal careers.

NO GUILT TRIPS REQUIRED

I'm not going to add my voice to those well-meaning friends or lifestyle "experts" who exhort you to start meditating, stop drinking, start exercising, or spend more time with your family. While I'd never discourage anyone from making positive changes in their lives, I know how challenging it can be for lawyers to add "one more thing" to our overflowing list of "shoulds."

There is, however, an alternative path to greater equanimity for lawyers, one that is more elegant and effective than trying to *will* your way to happiness through forced-march lifestyle changes. It's a route that will change you from the "outside-in" by fundamentally altering the very world where you spend so much of your time.

That transformative vehicle happens to be your law firm, and more specifically, the firm's culture as it relates to the shared values of *authenticity*, *integrity*, and *connection*.

In this article, I will relate how I came to discover this critical key to lawyer happiness, and I will follow up in the next issue with ways to co-create a culture in your firm that elicits and supports maximum happiness for each and all.

THE SECRET LIFE OF A SPIRITUAL WARRIOR/LAWYER

For me, discovering how to practice law while simultaneously living in integrity and equanimity wasn't a research project—it was my life. Actually, my *double life*. By day, I fought the fight of a litigator, not just against my courtroom adversaries but also against a local legal system that was severely compromised by the corrupt leadership of a 700-member Hare Krishna community that was finally taken down under RICO in 1991. (No, you can't make this stuff up, and yes, I did write a book about it.)

At night, I returned to the modest room I rented from my teacher, a Crazy Wisdom hillbilly Zen Master, and took on whatever disciplines, privations, and insane challenges happened to pop into his "Enlightened" mind that day.

DISCLAIMER:

Before we go any deeper into these "Confessions of a Spiritual Warrior/Lawyer," take heed—**DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!**

What I'm sharing here is my *story*, not my *model*. My former radical and relentless approach to law and life is neither recommended nor required for happiness in the legal profession. But the earnestness, intensity, and introspective nature of my path did yield hard-earned wisdom. And one of my most dramatic "disciplines" clearly showed how lawyers can achieve the happiness and peace of mind I sought without having to replicate my particular lifestyle.

ISOLATION AND CONNECTION

My teacher's "serious" students built cabins on his rugged farm and spent a month each winter holed up in total seclusion. I spent thirty days sequestered in my simple cabin (sans running water or electricity) without so much as a glimpse of another human being, alone hour after hour with my own mind and no distraction. This brought me face-to-face with myself and every difficult question about life, purpose, and happiness that I could otherwise avoid in "the real world." About halfway through these month-long sojourns, my painful soul-searching would suddenly be replaced by an abiding peace that brushed aside my worries and concerns. Finally, I was a truly happy man, who also happened to make his living as an attorney.

And then the waiter would bring the check... The month would come to an end, and I had to return to my life as a trial lawyer.

Oy.

But fortunately, that's not where the story ends.

During these isolations, I experienced my deepest capacity for happiness, and when I came out of isolation, I experienced the power my law firm had to sustain that happiness upon my re-entry into the world of law.

PARADISE LOST?

In the woods there was no time; in court, I had a judge warning that I had 10 minutes for my final closing argument. The only noise in the forest was the screech of an owl or the snort of a startled deer; now, I had a cacophony of voices competing for my attention. Perhaps most jarring was the relentless conflict. For a month, my only dustups were with my own mind; now the battle was on, and I had no stomach for fighting.

What saved me from deep despair wasn't meditation, vegetarianism, or any of my "spiritual practices." Rather, it was the support, companionship, and fellowship of my best friends, who also happened to be my law partners. They were the guys who held down the fort and covered my caseload for a full month so that I could commune with the gods and the bunny rabbits and return with a heart overflowing that brought the best to our practice, to our clients, to the world, and yes, even to the law itself.

A CULTURE OF CONNECTIVITY

Lou, Jon and I were tenacious lawyers and fearless fighters in the courtroom, but we created a culture of trust, humor, camaraderie, and connectedness in our firm. We shared values of authenticity, integrity, and trustworthiness without superfluous drama. We held each other's feet to the fire while having each other's backs, and we each retired with financial success and our health, reputations, and self-respect intact.

It was the culture my partners and I co-created that enabled me to maintain resonance with the best and most peaceful parts of myself that I discovered in isolation. And it is the culture of your firm that can likewise bring out the best and happiest in you—and in every member of your firm. What a joy and relief it will be to swim daily in a culture that embodies the uniqueness that has made your firm successful, while simultaneously leaving behind whatever superfluous conflict-creating baggage stands between you and real happiness.

In the next issue, I will outline how you and your firm can do just that.

David Gold is a former trial lawyer who now helps law firms and their attorneys grow their practices, improve retention, and stamp out burnout by evolving their caring and connectedness as organizations and people.