

## Look Before You Leap to BigLaw

By Edwin Reeser

Law students and associates, and often junior partners, are often asked what exactly is it that they do in a BigLaw firm? Why is it so stressful and difficult? Is it review documents? Draft instruments? Take depositions? Negotiate deals? What is so hard and unique about that? Why is it worth so much money? Why do so many smart people try so hard for so long, and yet so few actually make it and stay partners in these firms? Of course it isn't doing these things, for they are only tools and skill sets applied to the real task at hand, which is to learn to solve problems. But not just any problems.

What you get are the toughest Gordian knot problems. You have more exposure to deals as a transactional lawyer, or case strategy and tactics as a litigator, in 10 years than most top executives get in a lifetime. You develop a repository of technique and experience that is immensely valuable, and you discover pressure and challenge to be sweet candy, almost energy pills, invigorating, exciting, rewarding and even fun. An adrenaline surge comes from this work that is unavailable in almost any other setting. If you make it long enough to get there. And if and when you finally get there, and it stimulates you like nothing else, then that is a lifestyle and career option for you. If it is not what you ultimately want and need in your career and life, that type of pressure will be like adding bricks to the knapsack, carried around on your back until finally, it breaks you. There is no better source of continuous high-stakes action than big firm practice. That is what it is about. It is not "normal." Nobody ever said it was, any more than they said average take home pay of \$1.5 million for a partner is "normal." Do you want to be that kind of "special"? At that compensa-

tion level, you don't need the money to live on. You don't necessarily have a lot of spare time to spend it either. Because in most practices, after you make partner, you will only be working even harder. Like the high jump, every time you clear the bar, the bar gets raised and you jump again. The money may be a way of keeping score, but at the end of the day ... how many BMWs can you drive at one time?

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And the high pay at the start? Just a hazardous duty premium. You won't be a break even economic proposition for the big firm until about the middle of your third year. For the first two years, you will be in a cold sweat that somebody will figure out that you don't know what you are doing. Relax. We know already. Take the money. With 20 percent per year attrition rates, you deserve it.

Nobody every explained this to us in school as we trotted out to the interviews. I doubt anybody has done so for you. After 32 years of big firm practice, and being a managing partner of an AmLaw 50 law firm office, and loved most of it, here is my two cents of advice on this, and it applies to those in firms already as well as the students considering a career in law.

If you are married or have a relationship with a significant other, pay attention to it. This is the most important thing in your life. A career in the law does not trump it.

If you have children, be there for them. Be a good parent. These are human lives that you created and are responsible for. If you have a soccer game for little Melanie at 3 p.m. on Thursday ... as a managing partner, I encouraged you to go. I also insisted that all client needs that must be addressed at that time be handled, so if you have to stay up all night Wednesday to do it, then you will do it. You are a professional in a service business and the duty to the client is paramount.

Look after your spiritual health. Go to church, temple or whatever you choose. But pay attention to the part we call our soul.

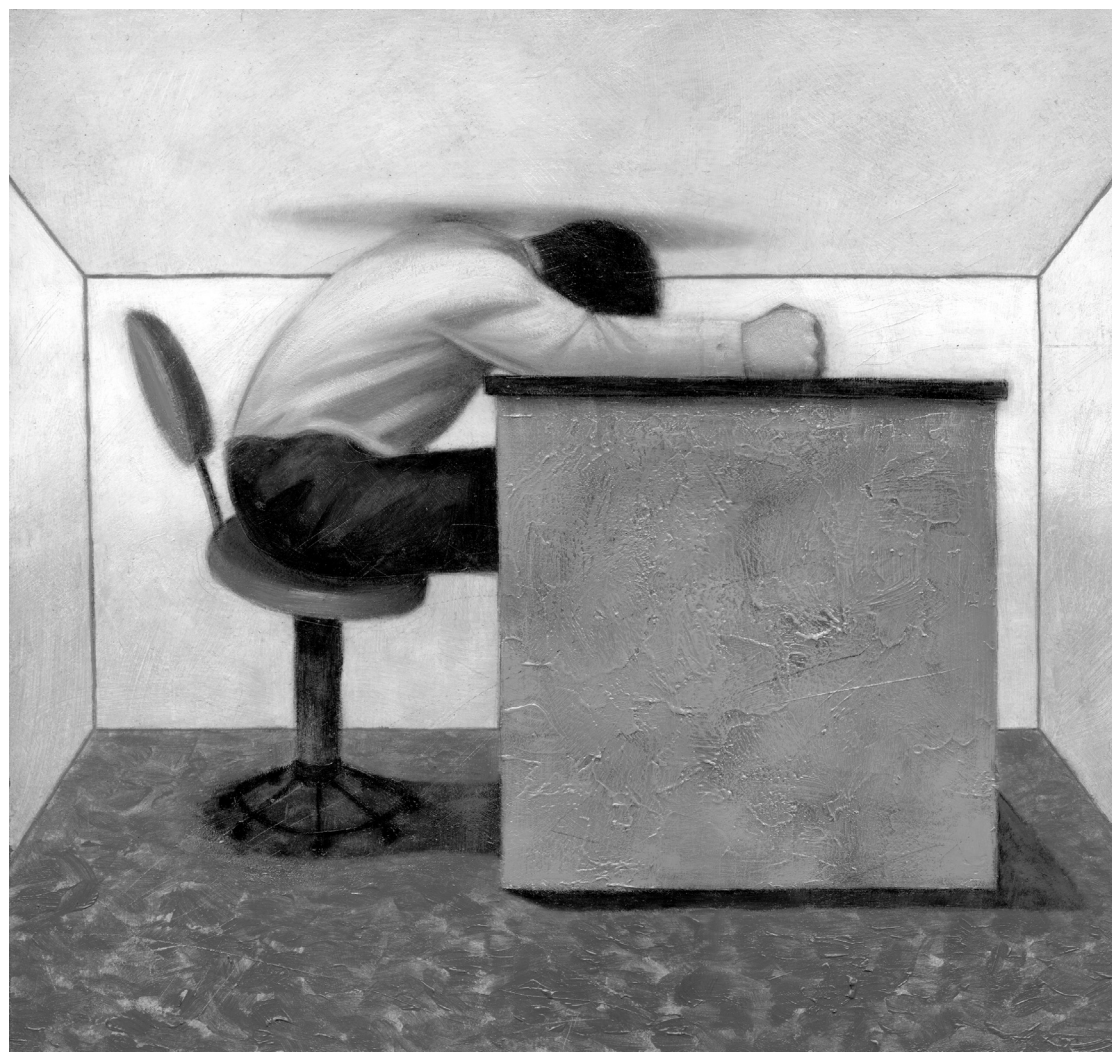
Look after your physical health. Eat right, exercise and see your doctors regularly. For people who think that they are brilliant, we tend to be pretty dumb about this one.

Be involved in your community, with charities, with causes that matter to you. Do something to make a difference for the betterment of others outside the law.

Have a hobby, something that enriches and energizes you. Most lawyers have magnificent talents beyond those necessary to practice law. Develop, use and enjoy them.

Be a great lawyer, an outstanding lawyer. Good is not good enough. Top firms don't have places for good lawyers. That is just the way it has to be. There is an unending and voracious need for the best. The cream at the top is thin, but if you are one of them, even in astoundingly bad economic times you are needed and will be well paid for your efforts.

If you cannot manage to do all of these things, then I would submit to you that you should leave BigLaw and change your job to one where you can achieve it.



BigLaw is only something that you do, while the others are your life. You have lots of choices available to you for making a living and a fine professional career. Have the courage and convictions you need to address this. You will be in control of your life and your career, and if you stay in the law it will be a work/life balance that is worth living. Once you start sacrificing any of your priorities, you are beginning a dangerous slide to compromising what you are working for. It is unlikely the slide will stop. Should you leave the profession, and that may happen before you graduate, two years after you graduate, or 20 or more years after you make partner, you will be doing so comfortably, knowing that it was not or is no longer the right career path for you. Some of the most successful attorneys are the

ones who went on to become a concert violinist, graphic artist, rabbi, Episcopal minister, or forest ranger, in addition to many in the world of corporate in-house attorneys, public service attorneys, government attorneys and of course business executives. But the one thing you cannot do is to put your life in the hands of people in BigLaw, trusting that they will be looking after your best interests and career any more than you would shove your hand into mouth of a crocodile because it has a beautiful smile. Life is hard. It is even harder when you are stupid. Use that brain you are so proud of. Remember the scorpion that asked the frog to carry him across the river because he could not swim? The frog refused, afraid that the scorpion would sting and kill him with its deadly venom. The scorpion said that was ridiculous,

he would never do such a thing because he could not swim, and if he stung the frog, they would both die. The frog relented and carried the scorpion across the river. Just as they landed the scorpion stung the frog, who was shocked, and screamed "How could you do this to me? I carried you safely across the river, and now you have killed me?" The scorpion just walked away and said, "Stop whining. You knew what I was when you gave me a ride."

Edwin B. Reeser is a business lawyer in Pasadena specializing in structuring, negotiating and documenting complex real estate and business transactions for international and domestic corporations and individuals. He has served on the executive committees and as a office managing partner of firms ranging from 25 to over 800 lawyers in size.

## Is Law Bringing Meaning to Your Life? Then Call It a Calling

By Timothy Tosta

The following insight of a 13th century Sufi poet, Rumi, survived eight centuries because of its truth, its clarity and its uncanny ability even now, in the 21st century, to still bring us up short: "There is one thing in this world you must never forget to do. Human beings come into this world to do particular work. That work is their purpose, and each is specific to the person. If you forget everything else and not this, there's nothing to worry about. If you remember everything else and forget your true work, then you will have done nothing with your life."

Although we spend less time in our lives devoted to our "work" than our ancestors did, work still manages to constitute some 70 percent of our waking existence. Given this extraordinary life commitment, it continues to amaze me how little time we devote to the examination of our work's meaning.

What does your work mean to you? How do you consider your "time spent" in its pursuit?

One useful inquiry describes three approaches to the notion of work — a "job" that focuses primarily on financial rewards; a "career" that centers on growing talent and accumulating recognition out of a desire for personal gain and advancement; and a "calling" that arises from an intrinsic commitment to an individual's core values, which is pursued in its own right,

without regard for money and advancement.

This structure corresponds to the "hierarchy of needs," described by psychologist Abraham Maslow, in which he postulated the self-actualized human being, fully and constructively engaged in life. So, it is not a surprise to find Maslow supporting our Sufi poet and declaring "One must respond to one's fate or one's destiny or pay a heavy price. One must yield to it; one must surrender to it; one must permit one's self to be chosen."

With both mystics and scientists confirming the importance of finding one's calling, how does one proceed?

First, let's take a moment to find out where you are now. If you find that: you like what you do, but don't expect much from your work; or your work is a vehicle to fund the balance of your life; or you are not excited to start a new work week; or you build your life around your vacations and opportunities for time off; or you think too much of your life is spent at work and you would prefer not to think of it during your off hours, your work is probably a job. If your primary motivation in your work is to become a success; if you view your career in its relationship to your standing with peers or competitors; if the goal of your work is to rise to the top of your field; if your greatest professional experiences center on achieving recognition from others, you are likely in a career. But if you tend to lose yourself in your work; if you feel that you are

continually in "flow" almost without a conscious sense of the passage of time; if you are working to truly make a difference in the world; if you see the source of your achievement as coming from something bigger than yourself; if you do what you do just because you love it; or if you believe that what you do allows

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you to utilize your natural gifts, you are probably in a calling.

Of course, as with all categorization systems, there are no bright lines. In my own 35 years of practice, I certainly have had jobs. Although I believe most of my work has been in the career category, in the last few years I have begun to fully appreciate the calling of my work. But in any given workweek, there are work aspects that could more honestly be categorized as a job or career. For me, it's hard to find practice group administration or attention to billings as anything other than a job. How does your work look to you?

Another consideration, as you

examine your place in the work hierarchy, is the exploration of whether you have found the right occupation. Many of us made career decisions when we were quite young. Others were greatly influenced by our family or culture in choosing our careers. Even if you possess the intellect and proficiency to excel in law, is it the match for you? Positive psychologist Nicholas Hall conducts research in the area of psychological profiles of various occupations. His research identifies unique profiles of character strengths for various occupations, particularly when compared to the population at large. Hall cites, for example, how artists have appreciation for beauty and excellence as their top strengths, while lawyers rank particularly low in spirituality. Hall currently is conducting research to see if he can identify special characteristics in those who see their occupations as a calling, and to ascertain if their character profiles are distinguishable from others in the field, who don't see their work as a calling. While such research may prove useful, the fundamental inquiry remains personal. What are you doing with your life in this work?

From my own experience, I have found that the job/career/calling inquiry is too narrowly framed. I began to see the calling aspects of my career only as I undertook completely unrelated work as a hospice volunteer at a community hospital. There, I changed my perception of what was important. I accessed

personal capacities that I had not known existed. And, I developed a profound curiosity for seeing how these changed perceptions and expanded capabilities could be applied to my legal work.

In other words, by doing service of an entirely different nature from my profession, I obliterated the line between work life and non-work life so that I was able to access my life purpose, values and intentions. I adapted my professional life to create a resonance that gives my work the aspects of a calling.

Try this exercise. Find a quiet place to sit, where you are likely not to be disturbed. Bring with you some paper and a writing implement with which to take notes. Give yourself five minutes to simply slow down, breath and quiet your mind. Now imagine that you are 95 years old. You are looking back on your life. Consider your responses to the following: What is it that you would have wanted to accomplish? What type of person would you have been to accomplish these things? How would you have had to spend your time? What would you have learned? What type of relationships would have surrounded you? What would you have wanted to experience? How would you want to feel about yourself? What brought the most meaning to your life? What did you contribute to the world? How well did you love others? What opportunities did you give others to love you?

These are not an easy questions. It takes patience. In fact, it may be

hard to complete this exercise in one, two or even three sittings. But what these reflections do, as you spend time with them, is help you see what is important to you. From the inquiries that you can't answer, you are given some direction as to further inquiry. Thinking about these questions also has a way of putting your work in its proper perspective. As you work through this exercise, you may begin to see, through this imaginary retrospective, what your purpose in life could be. And, you may find that some of that purpose has a direct and powerful link to your current work. If that is so, make that connection in your work and expand upon it.

Twentieth century poet Rainer Marie Rilke wrote a series of letters to an aspiring young poet, encouraging him in his work. His words are particularly relevant to this inquiry. "Be patient with all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves ... Do not now seek the answers which cannot be given you because you have not been able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then, gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer."

Good luck on your journey.

Timothy Tosta is one of California's leading land use and environmental attorneys with Luce Forward in San Francisco. He also is a certified integral coach, serving in house to the professionals at his firm.



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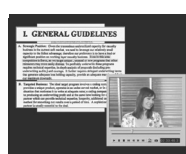
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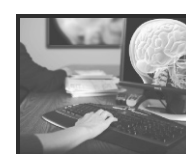
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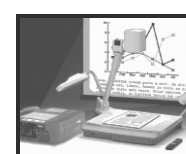
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