

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

By Spencer H. Silverglate

I was feeling pretty good, having survived what, for my beleaguered 40-year-old body, was another grueling workout. It was 8:00 Monday morning, and I was just leaving the gym, pumped up and ready to face the challenges of my 800th week as an attorney. The elevator arrived at the gym-level 15th floor of the downtown Miami skyscraper. I walked in and pressed the lobby button.

The first stop was the 13th floor. I walked a young man dressed in a pinstriped suit with a leather briefcase in one hand and legal files in the other. On the 11th floor, a distinguished older gentleman also clad in lawyerly attire boarded the elevator. The young man recognized the older one, and the two exchanged greetings. As I looked on, each asked about the other's family. When the subject turned to work, the young man candidly remarked, "I don't know about this lawyer stuff." The comment caught me by surprise, and I found myself beginning to listen intently to their conversation.

Attempting to console his young colleague, the older, seasoned lawyer replied, "Well, I know what you mean, but you just have to wait."

"Wait?" the young man asked with a glimmer of hope in his voice. "Wait for what?" I was relieved that he asked this question because if he didn't, I might have.

The older man was about to enlighten the younger one with his years of legal wisdom. I leaned in so as not to miss a word. With the question perfectly teed up, the older man answered, "I don't know; you just have to wait." Dead silence. That was it. All the hope this experienced lawyer could offer his young friend about our profession was to wait for something to change. Isn't that the definition of insanity, I thought to myself, repeating the same pattern again and again and expecting a different outcome.

The elevator arrived at the lobby, and the two men walked off together. Too dumbfounded to move, I just stood there. Here were two attorneys, one experienced and one not, but neither with any idea why he was practicing law in the first place.

As it turns out, they're not alone.

The Problem

We lawyers are among the highest paid and most influential of all professionals. Yet studies repeatedly show that, of professionals, we also experience among the highest rates of depression, job dissatisfaction, chemical dependency and divorce. In one study, a majority of lawyers said that they would not become lawyers again if they had the chance and would not recommend law as a career to their own children. Money and influence clearly are not making us happy. Of course, this comes as no surprise. If money and power were the keys to fulfillment, then Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and Kurt Cobain would have been some of the happiest people around.

In my role as managing partner of my law firm, I have interviewed countless candidates for attorney positions. Most list their professional goals as becoming a skilled lawyer, having their own clients and becoming a partner in a law firm. Many have told me that they are driven by excellence and a will to succeed. These are commendable goals, no doubt, but I wonder what will happen if they are fortunate enough to achieve them. When they finally get to the top of the mountain, will they be left wanting? After all, many lawyers who have achieved these goals don't seem terribly happy.

The quest to become a partner in a law firm has been likened to a pie eating contest in which the prize for winning is more pie. As an associate, we work eight to ten hours a day in hopes of becoming a partner, at which time we earn the privilege of working twelve to fourteen hours a day. We get more pie. True, we also make more money, but that doesn't satisfy us for very long. Might it be that the root of our unhappiness is that our goals are out of alignment? Is it possible that we lawyers strive not for too much but too little?

I've heard many lawyers say that what they do from Nine to Five (more like Eight to Seven) is not what they're about. They find meaning in life outside

of work. This, to me, is a total cop-out. We spend way too much time at work to say that it doesn't matter. Like it or not, what we do for a living is part of who we are. I believe we have the right and the obligation to find meaning and fulfillment not just after work, but at work. I believe every lawyer, no matter where she works or what her practice, has this ability. And I believe I know the way to get there.

The Solution: "Serving Others"

Victor Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived three years in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II. His father, mother, brother and wife were not as fortunate. Yet even though he lost his family and his possessions, he did not lose his dignity. Even though he endured unspeakable brutality, near starvation and the hourly expectation of death, he emerged from the experience with a stronger character, deeper faith and greater empathy for others. Frankl concluded that the one thing that could not be taken from him was his attitude—the ability to choose his response to his circumstances.

Anyone who not only survived but thrived under such extreme conditions as Frankl deserves our attention. In the preface to his book, *Man's Search for Meaning*, this is what he said about success:

Don't aim for success—the more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side-effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself.

To Frankl, the search for meaning in life is the primary human motivation. To be successful, we must look beyond ourselves and serve others. The paradox, as Frankl points out, is that by surrendering to and serving others, we actually find purpose and meaning in our own lives.

As a young lawyer, I decided to advance my legal career by reading Dale Carnegie's self-help books. After all, I wanted to "win friends and influence people" as much as the next guy. I was a bit disappointed by what I read. The suggestion in all of his books was to think more about others than ourselves. In fact, in one book he gave the secret to stop worrying about our problems: "start worrying about someone else's problems." This sounded like so much drivel to me when I read it, but I'm starting to think he may have been on to something. Living only to gratify ourselves has proven not to be very gratifying. Our universe is small and confining when we place ourselves at the center of it

It's been said that a measure of mental health is how much one gives to others. I like to receive more than most, but I can scarcely remember the gifts I have gotten over the years. I can, however, remember every significant gift I have ever given. What I have given unquestionably has had more lasting significance to me than what I have gotten.

An often-used example from nature is the Sea of Galilee, a body of water in Israel which is vibrant and teeming with life. The Sea of Galilee receives water upstream from the Jordan River and sends it downstream to the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea, in contrast, only receives water; it gives nothing. As a result, it is stagnant and devoid of life.

So if giving to others is the way to find meaning and fulfillment in our lives and in our work, what is it that lawyers have to give? In a word, "service." We as lawyers are in a unique position to transcend ourselves and serve others. In fact, our profession is all about service: serving our clients, serving our law firms or corporate employers and serving our communities.

Serving our Clients

Being a lawyer is, first and foremost, about serving clients. Without a client, there is no lawyer. At bottom, lawyers solve problems for their clients. Life, by its nature, is filled with tension. Lawyers work to ease the tension. We are the oil in the machine. We should take great pride and satisfaction in being society's problem-solvers.

More importantly, however, lawyers are trusted by their clients as confidants and counselors. I can remember family gatherings long ago at which my father, a businessman with lots of education but none of it in the classroom, would ask one of our lawyer relatives for advice. Some of the topics involved legal issues, but most did not. I took notice of how my father respected and trusted this lawyer, and I hoped that one day I would engender those feelings in people. As lawyers, we have an opportunity to make human connections with our clients and to help them solve their problems.

Serving our Law Firms

Money and profit are not the only things, but let's face it, they're important. We have an obligation to our employer and to our coworkers to ensure that our organization makes money and is profitable. Otherwise, there is no organization. In the bestselling book, *From Good to Great*, the author posits that money and profit are to an organization

what air and water are to life. They are essential to its existence, but they are not the meaning of its existence.

Serving our organization goes beyond serving the inanimate entity. It's about serving the living, breathing people that make up the organization—our coworkers. While some might be "above us" or "below us" in the corporate hierarchy, all deserve to be treated with the same respect and dignity. And all deserve our best efforts to ensure that their needs are met, economic and otherwise.

Serving our Communities

To those who have been given much, much is expected. We cannot find true fulfillment unless we transcend our small circle of daily life and serve the greater community in which we live and work. The opportunities to serve our communities are endless.

Pro bono work is an obvious example. I hear many young litigation attorneys lament that they never get to go to trial. If that sounds like you, sign up for a volunteer lawyer program. In our jurisdiction, the federal courts encourage law firms to send their young lawyers to try "excessive force" cases brought by prisoners. Although the lawyer may be inexperienced, she will have a better idea of how to try the case than the client, whose last experience in the courtroom, after all, was not a good one (remember, jail was the end result!). The federal judges in our area have told us in no uncertain terms that they will remember the law firms who volunteer to try these cases—always a good thing when you need a continuance the next time you appear in that courtroom.

While pro bono work is an excellent way for lawyers to serve their communities, we should not be constrained by our legal abilities when it comes to service. We are people first, lawyers second. Go out and organize a food drive for the needy. Serve food at the local homeless shelter. Mentor a young person. Conduct a mock trial at a high school. Teach a class at a community college. Get involved in a charitable organization. The ways to serve are limited only by our imagination.

Getting Started

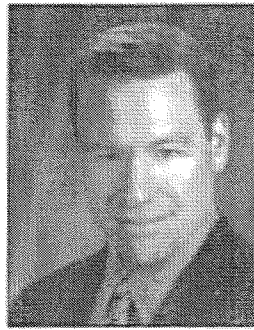
Author Stephen Covey suggests the following exercise. Imagine that you have the privilege of observing your own funeral. You've lived a long, full life, and now you get to hear what your family, friends and colleagues really thought of you. As they're eating their potato salad and munching on cold cuts, what would you hope they're saying about you?

Would it be that you wielded influence and made lots of money? Probably not. More likely, it would be that you connected with everyone in that room. That you served them and gave more than you took.

The good news is that you're not dead yet. You're still alive, and you still have the opportunity to act. The opportunities to serve are all around us. I can say with complete confidence that if you put it off until it's more convenient, or you're more established, or your house is clean and you're finances in order, it will never happen. The timing will never be perfect. Now is the time to start. Wherever you are in your legal career, you have something to give that someone needs.

So what are *you* waiting for?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR...



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