


Lawyer Spirituality: An Invitation for 2021

By Victoria Vuletich and Lauren Birdsall

ur success as lawyers goes well beyond our résumé, expertise, and how we manage our practice. It goes to the very core of who we are. While our actions as lawyers do not capture or define who we are, who we are is, in large part, manifested in what we do.

Think of the most personally and professionally content lawyer you know. The lawyer you know who consistently makes other people's lives better. The most positive, emotionally generous lawyer you know, and how they make any situation better just by being who they are.

Perhaps you will agree that these attorneys often share one common dynamic: they are spiritual people. These lawyers think deeply about life and their purpose in it. They believe in something bigger than themselves even if that belief is not rooted in traditional religion. These lawyers know that their lives are not just about them. Most importantly, they bring that belief system into their work. They do not distinguish between "role" and "soul."¹ Many lawyers who regularly engage in pro bono work exemplify this principle.

But pro bono work is not the only vehicle for spiritual satisfaction as lawyers. One

Michigan lawyer who practiced in a small town regularly took seemingly losing cases. These clients were often uneducated, lived on the margins of society, and were always without means. Their cases were long-shot legal claims, or the clients themselves were not traditionally sympathetic plaintiffs.

The lawyer lost money on a good many of these cases. His colleagues frequently ribbed him for taking cases they turned down when the clients originally came to them. Even the lawyer would sometimes joke about how they hurt his bottom line.

Yet this lawyer was happiest and at his best when working these cases. He knew that it was not about winning or losing the case; it was about recognizing his clients' dignity as human beings by opening the courthouse doors to them. One year, one of the cases resulted in the largest jury verdict in the state. Although the money was important to the lawyer, something else fed his soul.

At its best, law is a healing profession. If our most content, positive, and life-changing attorneys are spiritually grounded, why don't we discuss spirituality more openly in the profession and acknowledge our capacity for being healing lawyers? Instead, the legal culture eschews open exploration of the spiritual side of practice by believing, wrongly, that a lawyer's spiritual or religious beliefs are something private that should

not inform a lawyer's daily work. Not only is this impossible as a human being, our practice and professional identity are direct products of our values and worldview—of who we are as people.

Our wisdom and spiritual insight reveal to us those things that are not discernable from the law alone. Perhaps our intuition signals just the right "something" to say to a client to best position them to hold realistic views and expectations for the outcome of their case. By allowing our spiritual inner voice to serve as a guide, we can balance our rational, practical sensibilities as lawyers with our client's needs and insights. As we listen, we listen not only with our mind for the facts of the case, but we listen with our heart, our empathy, and our intuition to learn and understand the impact of the circumstances on the person's life and how we can best help them.

One lawyer we know adopts this holistic approach with her clients. She recognizes that a client's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual state often create or contribute to the legal situation that needs addressing. She gives the client space to reflect and share the whole story. She patiently listens while the client talks about things not relevant to the legal issue but that are important to them. She does not direct the conversation or push them along. Often, legal matters trigger reactions from clients rooted

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in memories of old wounds and unhealed trauma. By allowing the person to express their truth more fully, this lawyer helps to free her client's energy so they can effectively focus on the work to be done in their legal matter.

One pro bono client hired the lawyer for a boundary dispute with her neighbor. It was ugly and contentious. In listening patiently and deeply to the client, the lawyer realized the client was channeling her feelings from another issue into the boundary dispute. For the client, the property had taken on psychological and emotional significance which was complicating resolution of the boundary dispute. By acknowledging and honoring the client's emotions, the attorney was able to successfully resolve the issue.

This lawyer's spiritual approach helps her form a deeper connection with her clients, calm their unproductive energy, find clarity, and potentially heal differences. Even when setbacks occur, her clients can move forward because their dignity has been honored.

Our professional culture emphasizes the purely legal and technical aspects of our role. The ceaseless, career-long, and critically necessary integration of our role with our soul is done almost exclusively on an individual basis, informally, and, for too many of us, without the benefit of lawyer mentors willing to engage in what feels like private and tender exploration.

As this holiday season unfolds, let us anchor ourselves in the "interconnectedness of all things"² and usher in a renewed recognition of the spiritual power in us. Let the new year serve as a daily invitation to ground ourselves in a profound sense of purpose, mission, and awareness that the work we do can heal and transform.

If you seek a place to get in touch with your spirituality as a lawyer, we invite you to join us as we gather together online monthly to explore, share, and discuss the connection between our roles and souls. We are eager to hear your insights and experiences. We can be reached at lbirdsall@aol.com and victoria@vuletichlawfirm.com. ■



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ENDNOTES

1. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), p 10.
2. Rohr, *Daily Meditations*, Ctr for Action and Contemplation (October 30, 2020) <<https://cac.org/category/daily-meditations/2020/10/>> (website accessed November 12, 2020).



community service

access to justice

pro bono

