

Spirituality in Law School

"Let me be clear. At its core the legal profession faces not so much a crisis of ethics, or commercialization, or public relations, but a spiritual crisis. Lawyers and the profession have lost their way." (Joseph G. Allegretti, *The Lawyer's Calling*, emphasis in original.)¹

Many lawyers and law students do not find joy and satisfaction in their present calling. Symptoms of the problem are everywhere. Tests show abnormal levels of psychological distress and dysfunction among law students and lawyers. Studies reveal above average rates of substance abuse, divorce, and even suicide. Outward measures of success, whether money or grades, prove to be no substitute for a loss of inner meaning, a loss of one's way.

Spirituality addresses this loss. It is the inclusive, deep sense of belonging and participation shared by all persons in varying degrees of strength according to Rachel Remen in *Spirit: Resource for Healing*. Often confused with religion, morality, or ethics, spirituality usually is ignored in law schools and in practice.

Over the years, a number of persons have taken up the challenge of helping law students and lawyers find their way. A recent overview is in Steven Keeva's ABA book *Transforming Practices*. The subtitle says it all: *Finding Joy and Satisfaction in the Legal Life*. Unlike Keeva, this column samples more narrowly from the extensive efforts of law professors across the nation who want to get to the root of what is happening to our profession.

No better starting point can be found than in Hawaii where Professor Calvin Pang teaches in an elder law clinic. Not only are clinics a traditional home for innovative teaching in law school, but an elder law clinic especially provides students with fertile ground for seeing clients struggling with the meaning of life and spiritual issues in general. In an article titled "Eyeing the Circle: Finding a Place for Spirituality in a Law School Clinic," Pang explains, "[A]n elder law clinic, like a hospital, where illness, isolation, and ap-

proaching death may propel one toward an awareness of the spiritual, is a place where matters of the soul are raised, examined, and even resolved."² Pang develops three arguments for recognizing a spiritual dimension in law school teaching.

- The work of lawyering and maintaining our personhood is inevitably hard and if we have any hope of equipping our students to deal with this tension, we ought to consider the cultivating of spiritual muscle.
- If we are intent on getting our profession and our work out of the gutter, we need to become pilgrims on a higher journey, finding firm ground by reaching upwards.
- We deprive ourselves of an essential component of our being by ignoring our spiritual dimension, and that the teaching and practice of law as a human enterprise loses something important when we shun the spiritual.

Both law students and practitioners will find these arguments fruitful topics for reflection.

One way Pang builds spirituality into his classes is by asking his students to write journals that go beyond the usual reflection on interactions between the students and others. In addition, he asks them "to think specifically about who they are, where they came from and are going, the values, purposes, and meaning that drive them, and the place of the law in all of this." These questions also can help a practitioner discern inner meaning.

Writing a journal captures insights and allows patterns to develop over time. Even more importantly, a journal helps people gain satisfaction by seeing their own progress. If more students and practitioners gained that sort of satisfaction, perhaps fewer would burn out and fewer would leave the profession.

In Massachusetts, Professor Cheryl Conner offered a course at Suffolk University

School of Law entitled: *The Reflective Lawyer: Peace Training for Lawyers*. Students talk about their values, fears, and concerns such as "that the practice of law will crush their souls, cause them to betray themselves, or make them feel burned-out and angry."³ To help handle these concerns, Conner introduces them to meditation, visualization, and other tools that she initially drew from the Buddhist tradition. For example, she builds on the analytical skills of law students by teaching them analytical meditation. Thus, students can preserve their new skills while still bringing the human side of the equation back into balance.

In Michigan, I first offered a course in Law and Spirituality in 1996 modeled after one developed by Dr. Jake Foglio at Michigan State University's medical school. The purpose of the law school class was to help students discover and integrate their own spiritual backgrounds into their new careers in law. Given the diversity of the student body at Thomas M. Cooley Law School, course participants come from very different traditions. A recent class included Muslim and Jewish students, secular humanist students, and students from a number of different Christian traditions. Although beliefs, texts, and traditions vary greatly, the personal growth challenges provide common ground for the students to explore their new roles and career possibilities.

The core of the class is a set of readings about the current state of the profession, examples of what has been done in medicine and in nursing, and information about similar courses in other law schools. Key ideas have been supported with the works of Professors Lucia Ann Silecchia (spirituality), Susan Daicoff (lawyer distress), and Lawrence Krieger (law student distress). In addition, students are introduced to the argument, developed mainly in psychology, that spirituality is an element of professional competence. Professionals must understand both the client's and their own spirituality or the

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resulting professional relationship will be hindered. Diversity in the classroom makes this argument easier to see and accept.

Examples can be as simple as the implications of offering an afternoon cup of coffee to a Muslim during Ramadan. More complicated would be the discussion of divorce, domestic violence, or incest if the client comes from a Hindu tradition. Although students cannot be expected to know all the spiritual traditions of the world, they can learn to be sensitive to aspects of the attorney-client relationship that often are ignored in law school.

That sensitivity lays the foundation for relating, not just to clients, but also to juries, judges, opposing attorneys, and others with whom they have professional contact. At the very least, students have a chance to preserve the inner strengths and values that initially attracted them to the law. Students, and graduates, often said that their employment decisions would have been much harder if they had not had a chance to think through the implications for their deepest beliefs. Caught between large debts and larger ideals, they needed an opportunity to make sense of it as best they could.

These three examples are but a small sample of what many law professors are exploring and developing to improve the profession, its effectiveness, and its public perception. Although many challenges remain in achieving the right balance in what we teach, it clearly is an exciting time to be a law professor and a lawyer. ◆



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FOOTNOTES

1. 3 (1996)
2. 35 Willamette L. Rev. 241, 266.
3. Steven Keeva, Transforming Practices 183 (1999).