

“If I Had a Nickel.....”

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I have a love-hate relationship with clichés.

Sometimes I just love them. Sometimes they so perfectly describe a situation that you can totally understand why they became clichés in the first place. If you have ever been really sick (or were scared that you might be), you gain a new appreciation for the phrase “when you have your health, you have just about everything.” If you have ever baby-sat little kids after your own are all grown up, you can totally relate to the adage that advises “have children while you’re young.” And when your two best friends decide to get married on the same day in different cities, you suddenly comprehend the meaning of the old saying “you can’t dance at two weddings.”

But there are other times when a cliché makes me want to scream. In my career consulting practice, if I’ve heard the phrase “I went to law school because I was told it was a ticket to do anything” once, I’ve heard it thousands of times. I do believe that whoever said those words to the unhappy lawyer now sitting in my office *meant* well when giving the advice, but it’s simply bad information. A legal education may be useful in anything you decide to do – certainly the kinds of strategic thinking and persuasive writing and on-your-feet debating learned in law school are excellent tools for most any situation – but they do not generate a “get out of law free” card that one can hand to a new employer as a means of entry into another profession.

Similarly, those clients who claim to have gone to law school in order to “keep all their options open,” may have closed more doors than they ever realized by identifying with a profession that is often viewed as negative, narrow and non-productive. Most of us don’t REALLY want to have a whole bunch of random, open doors—it’s way too confusing. Much better to focus career choices on those options that actually interest and challenge us, intellectually and emotionally.

Those clients who feel compelled to work around the clock due to a delusion that their work is all important, need to be reminded that “Rome wasn’t built in a day” and that there are advantages to moving a bit slower, now and then, in order to remember to “stop and smell the flowers.”

Those who are unhappy practicing law but keep job hunting within the same segment of the legal profession (*i.e.*, going from firm to firm) because they think that there must be some legal position better than the one they currently hate, would do well to recall that “a bird in the hand is often worth two in the bush.” Similarly, many clients have found their way to my office after coming to grips with the fact that “the grass isn’t always greener on the other side.”

But sayings like “do what you love and the money will follow” fall in the “good” cliché category; when someone picks a career because of intrinsic love for a certain industry or joy in the participation thereof, the return is substantial. I’m not talking only financial returns here, I’m also including the “psychic benefits” that come from being meaningfully engaged in an enjoyable pursuit. Likewise, “doing well by doing good” describes so many of my clients who, over the years, have opted out of the corporate world to go back and give back at the non-profit or government level.

Now “if I had my druthers,” (a phrase which my kids don’t even understand and hence find totally hilarious every time I use it), I would encourage every frustrated lawyer to temporarily ignore the practical side and take a few introspective moments to consider what might feel really, truly and professionally satisfying. From there, we could work together to explore new directions, outline strategies and tactics to understand and infiltrate those new areas and, finally, develop plans to market and sell the “new and improved” versions of themselves accordingly. This isn’t just a “flight of fancy.” I have story after story, case history after case history to back up the process.

And for those skeptics who say it can’t be done...that a “tiger can’t change its stripes” or “you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear”? “REALLY?!?”

I just wish I had a nickel for every time someone said *that* to me.....