

## Seeking wholeness – a lawyer in search of his authentic self

*“The first thing we do, let’s kill all the lawyers”* --- Shakespeare. Henry VI

At 17 I had no idea what career path to pursue. But it seemed I needed to make a decision, so I went to see the career’s adviser at school who suggested I was suited for a profession “such as law or teaching”. Teaching didn’t appeal so I chose the law.

And so it was that I became a lawyer. I don’t regret that decision - I have enjoyed my work and have benefited in all sorts of ways. Yet there have been many times when I have wanted to reject the lawyer part of me, to run away and be a painter, or start a delicatessen or something. This is due to my restless spirit and also because I like to be more hands-on than is usually called for in a lawyer’s role. But it is also because it can be a hard path to follow - lawyers are not universally loved. I have sometimes wondered if there is something inherently bad about the profession - people always laugh when I say “Trust me, I am a lawyer” !

I feel I have come to terms with all this now. I have moved on, working as a business adviser and drawing on the skills I gained in legal practice. And I know that there is nothing wrong with lawyers and lawyering. The real challenge has been to integrate my values with my work, to be true to myself. I want to share what I have learned as I have met this challenge.

My first experience of the law I began my career as an articled clerk (now called a trainee solicitor) with a commercial law practice in the City, specialising in litigation. This was not a happy experience! I was not particularly good at litigation and I found it had little to do with justice or finding fair solutions to disputes and much to do with lawyers trying to score points over the “other side”. The British legal system breeds antagonism.

The system is also unwelcoming for non-lawyers, having complex rules and antiquated practices. It can feel (and it certainly felt to me) to have a rather arbitrary and artificial character, far removed from real life. As law professor Simon Roberts put it, the law is “*a discrete sub-system, rather cut off from the rest of society*”. Courts are “*remote places presided over by specialists who conduct their business against a background of unfamiliar ritual*”.<sup>1</sup>

Within this system, a lawyer’s role is to take one side of a case and argue in favour of it, whether he believes in it or not. Is it then surprising that people don’t trust lawyers?

What’s more, the behaviour of lawyers tends to mystify or intimidate their clients, giving the profession a bad name. To start with, lawyers’ language is hard to understand. It is designed for communicating with other lawyers, an antiquated secret code (as an in-house lawyer I often described myself as an interpreter). Pick up a typical contract and you will find it hard to digest in one sitting; it starts with three pages of definitions, such as “*a day means a period of 24 hours*” and “*the United Kingdom means Great Britain and Northern Ireland*”. Who cares? Most lawyers seem to find this style normal but to me it is off-putting and a real barrier to communication.

Fees are another source of irritation and tension. There is the awful hourly charge, which turns legal advice into a commodity and leads to divisions between lawyer and client. And lawyers are expensive. Charges of £150 per hour are not uncommon for high street solicitors and they rise to over £500 per hour for some City lawyers. Compare this with the weekly salary of £500 for an experienced staff nurse in the NHS.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, some lawyers are simply arrogant. They get carried away, believing that what they do is intrinsically important.

To be fair, as a society we probably get the lawyers we deserve, and clients have to accept some responsibility for their lawyers' actions. There are clients who use the law to punish or gain revenge over a neighbour, a business partner, or even their spouse. Others are looking for someone to blame for an injury or loss. Personal injury lawyers constantly turn down people hoping to get rich through a law suit - there is no shortage of claimants.

Then there are business people, who have different motivations for misusing the law. Some corporations use lawyers to lobby governments, seeking to relax inconvenient regulations they believe restrict their ability to make profit. Then there are powerful companies who throw their weight around, hiring expensive lawyers to threaten their competitors or bully their suppliers. One purchasing manager I worked for wanted to include in a long-term contract the right to reduce the price he paid, at will, "to respond to market changes". Suppliers can be so dependent on their large customers that they feel forced to accept such outrageous terms. The lawyer is the weapon used to impose the will of the powerful.

Given these patterns it is not surprising that many lawyers are unhappy in their work. They enter the profession with the idea of making a useful contribution to society, only to get a shock when they start practising. A survey in America in 1998 showed that one third of lawyers were so disillusioned or dissatisfied that they were considering quitting the law.<sup>3</sup>

A better experience As for me, I concluded early on that a law firm was not the place for me, so I left shortly after qualifying. The universe kindly arranged matters so that I soon found my niche, as an in-house lawyer for a large corporation. Suddenly I was part of a team, negotiating contracts for international transactions, working alongside accountants, engineers and marketing people. There was a real sense of collaborating to find practical solutions.

I learned that contracts can be vital for businesses. Yet typically they are too long, take ages to negotiate and are difficult to understand. The big picture is obscured and the relationship between the parties is damaged as they haggle over issues of minor importance. I find that lawyers approach contracts defensively, looking for something that will stand up in court. Yet this is counter-productive - their attitude increases friction between the parties and makes it more likely that they will end up in court. It reminds me of a story I heard of how racing drivers, when their car leaves the track, tend to look at the barrier ahead of them. Sure enough, they hit it! Sports psychologists have now taught them to keep looking at the track if they come off – this increases the chance they will miss the barrier.

In the same way, I try to take a positive attitude in contract negotiations, asking the question "How can we use the contract to build the foundations of a healthy business relationship?" This usually leads to productive negotiations and the contracts tend to be clearer and more concise, focusing on the essence of the matter. They then provide the basis for a healthy, robust relationship, one more likely to survive the inevitable ups and downs of business life.

Some solicitors may object that it is easier to practice like this if you work in-house, since you are free to be bold. Private practice solicitors produce longer documents partly out of fear of omitting something and being sued if things go wrong.

Yet I know solicitors who manage this very well. I remember in particular a brilliant solicitor who helped me with a complex purchasing arrangement. He listened, quickly grasped the essence of the matter and went away to produce a three page contract, which was exactly what we needed. To me this was how Mozart would write contracts if he came back as a lawyer – effortlessly and beautifully.

Thus I learned how rewarding it can be to practice law. I was not surprised to learn that law was once considered a healing profession, along with medicine and the clergy. Chief Justice Warren

Burger of the US Supreme Court said not long ago: “*This healing function ought to be the primary role of the lawyer in the highest conception of our profession*”.<sup>4</sup> This notion has been lost in our modern practice; some might find it bizarre. Yet I can heal a broken relationship between two people or two organisations by helping them see matters from the other’s perspective. I can also heal an individual who is struggling with a problem - by actively listening, I help him to find the answer deep inside himself. To my mind this ability to listen is the most important quality required to be a lawyer.

Seeking wholeness “*Above all, to thine own self be true.*”-- Shakespeare. Hamlet

I spent over 10 years working with large corporations. As I gained more experience, I realised that it wasn’t enough just to be a good technical lawyer. To be fulfilled in my work I needed to integrate all of my personality, all of my passions into what I did. This is what I think of as integrity. As lawyers we are encouraged to be analytical, rational and objective. Yet there is so much more to us than that. We are human beings with feelings, intuitions and passions. Shouldn’t we bring the whole of us to work, rather than wear a professional mask? If we love colours, why wear only black and white?

Thus I give myself permission to bring my feelings into my work and to rely on my intuition as well as my intellect. Sometimes this may mean telling a client something I know she doesn’t want to hear, or perhaps turning down work if I don’t believe in the client, or when someone else is better suited to do the work.

It’s not always easy to do the right thing. I faced a real dilemma in 2002 when working for a large international retailer. Having joined as group legal manager I had moved into a project management role in corporate finance. It was a great place to work – I liked my colleagues, enjoyed my work and was paid well.

However I had become increasingly aware of the social and environmental crisis that we all face, and of the major role played by multinationals in precipitating this crisis. To my mind corporate social responsibility programmes, no matter how honestly pursued, do not go far enough – a fundamental rethink is required. There was a basic conflict between my values and my work but I couldn’t bring myself to give up the comfort of a steady well-paid job.

As I wrestled with this internal conflict, fate stepped in to rescue me. I was offered redundancy, since the department was being wound down, and I accepted with some relief. I left the company, destination unknown.

At first I refused to face up to what my heart told me to do. I rejected everything - not just working for multinationals but the very idea of being a lawyer. Over the next two years I tried a number of things, with varying degrees of success (I nearly opened that delicatessen...).

What am I doing here? Eventually I started to get clarity as I began to seek my life purpose – what I had come to this planet to do. I now believe we were each born with a task to perform in this lifetime. Some of us know it intuitively from an early age, most seem to take a long time to realise it and others may never work out what it is. When you are fulfilling your purpose in life, you enjoy your work more than ever before; it feels effortless. You are obeying what Deepak Chopra calls “the law of least effort”.<sup>5</sup>

All this may seem a little strange to Western minds, yet it is quite familiar in the East. Indian sacred texts have the concept of *dharma*, which has a number of meanings, one of which is “life purpose”, the work you were born to do. The idea is that if you follow your *dharma* then you are working in accordance with the essential order of things, leading to harmony, goodness and inner peace.

Essentially following your *dharma* means that you do nothing that is contrary to the true Self within. For me, this sums up what integrity is all about.

Thinking about all this, I finally realised what I had to do. It wasn't necessary to reject my previous experience and my skills as a legal adviser – rather I needed to seek like-minded people to work with. I decided to set up my own practice.

Yet with no clients and little experience of marketing myself, I faced a daunting challenge. So while starting to explore the possibilities I applied for temporary positions, leading to an offer of an eight month contract as a lawyer with a building society. This offered secure income and a role with an ethical employer, possibly leading to a permanent position. I was tempted.

Let me stop here to describe a dream I had some time ago, in which I saw two paths ahead of me. One was broad, grey and flat, with railings on each side. It was, in other words, safe but boring. The other was beautiful, but narrow and risky. It rose up high and graceful over a deep chasm, ending in an enchanted wood at the far side. Which would I choose?

Back in real life, I am pleased to say I chose beauty over security – I turned down the job offer. Instead I set up on my own as a business adviser, combining my legal background with my management experience, trusting that people would come to me. Which they have. I am now working with inspiring, enthusiastic and talented people who, with me, are seeking more ethical ways of doing business. I know I am on the right path.

The end? Or another beginning? I began with a quote about killing the lawyers. I now see this as a neat metaphor for the process I have been through. I had to “kill the lawyer”, i.e. to reject a profession I could no longer wholeheartedly identify with, and to let go of my career and the lifestyle that came with it. I thus liberated myself to explore a different way of being – one that is more scary and unpredictable, but also more creative, interesting and, ultimately, fulfilling. It has been a long journey and yet it feels like this is where the story really starts.

Patrick Andrews is a business consultant and writer. He is a co-founder of Pineapple, an innovative business consultancy that is exploring new, more healthy ways of operating on the planet. A former solicitor, he has a particular interest in organisational design – his dream is to build organisations that have sustainability built into their DNA. You can contact Patrick on [patrick@pineapple.cc](mailto:patrick@pineapple.cc).

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## References:

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Roberts “Order and Dispute”. 1979. p22

<sup>2</sup> See the NHS website - [http://www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/nhs-knowledge\\_base/data/11.html](http://www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/nhs-knowledge_base/data/11.html)

<sup>3</sup> Lawcare “An Alternative Career” (published at [www.lawcare.org.uk](http://www.lawcare.org.uk)). Figures for the UK not available. One recent development in the UK is the formation of a group called *Lawyers for Change* whose aim is “to inspire lawyers to be a force for good”. The group, which is open to lawyers and non-lawyers, can be contacted by e-mail at: [maitland@kaltons.co.uk](mailto:maitland@kaltons.co.uk).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted on [www.healingandthelaw.org](http://www.healingandthelaw.org).

<sup>5</sup> Deepak Chopra “The Seven Spiritual laws of Success”. 1996 p51.