

Weather Patterns

BY ROBYNN MORAITES

Why do some lawyers find it easier to kill themselves than to admit they are unhappy and need to make a change?

This may seem like an overly dramatic opening to an article about lawyer mental health, but it reflects the urgency I feel about bringing to light the importance of an underlying psychological/spiritual malady that affects all of us—our fundamental human condition and the illusions that go with it.

The human condition I'm speaking about is not limited to legal practitioners, but rather affects everyone. The problem for those of us in the legal profession is that we have bought into some of these illusions to a greater extent than others. The lawyers who choose suicide rather than face the truth of their lives are our profession's "canaries in the coal mine," the first to warn of us what lies ahead if we continue to deprive ourselves of the oxygen of mental equanimity and emotional stability.

If you've ever seen me speak at a CLE, you know that I am a big fan of continuums. I often refer to a slide containing a big red line with arrows on each side of a continuum and observe that most of the mental health problems encountered by lawyers are not the either/or propositions that lawyers are so adept at creating. Rather than a simple choice between I'm OK/I'm not OK, I am anxious/I am not anxious, etc. we are all on a continuum somewhere between the "top of our game" and "disabled." We move along this continuum based on various circumstances: life situations, organizational factors, the facts of a particular case or client matter, how passionate we feel about our practice area, whether our practice area has any emotional perks or inherent rewards, heredity/genes, and countless other factors that may feel or actually be beyond our control.

I bring up the continuum because, while it would be easy and reassuring to separate our life situation from that of lawyers who

die by suicide, these lawyers actually reside on the far end of the same continuum on which we all sit and on which we all travel. The continuum of which I speak is less a measure of mental health than an indicator of how much we have bought into the illusion of our false self, our ego's power and its mistaken chase for something outside of ourselves that we think will finally make us happy, satisfied, and whole.

At my CLE presentations, you have heard me talk about the ego and the false self. I spend a considerable amount of time discussing the ways in which the legal profession reveres and reinforces the ego and false self, and why it is so detrimental to our mental health and overall quality of life. I also highlight specific ways we can begin to disidentify with the ego and false self and begin to create a trustworthy and objective inner observer.

In his book about meditation and contemplative practice, *Into the Silent Land*, Martin Laird provides a remarkably good metaphor for the human condition. Rather than botch his beautiful writing by way of paraphrase, let me quote him directly as he richly discusses the "riveting of our attention, the constant chatter of the cocktail party going on in our heads." It is a long quote, but I include it because it can free us from so many of the false ideas that can rob of us our happiness, and in extreme cases, even our lives.

The...wholeness that flowers in silence, dispels the [previously described painful] illusion of separation [from ourselves, others, life, and the present moment].¹ For when the mind is brought to stillness, and all of our strategies of acquisition [and distraction to avoid feeling anything] have dropped, the deeper truth presents itself.... [We are already whole and are not separated and alone like we mistakenly feel and think we are]. The marvelous world of thoughts, sensation,



emotions, and inspiration, the spectacular world of creation around us, are all patterns of stunning weather on...a mountain. But we are not the weather. We are the mountain. Weather is happening—delightful sunshine, dull sky, or destructive storm—this is undeniable. But if we think we are the weather happening on [the mountain] (and most of us do precisely this with our attention riveted to the video), then the fundamental truth of our [wholeness and] union...remains obscured and our sense of painful alienation heightened. When the mind is brought to stillness we see that we are the mountain and not the changing patterns of weather appearing on the mountain. We are the awareness in which thoughts and feelings (what we take to be ourselves) appear like so much weather on the mountain.

For a lifetime we have taken this weather—our thoughts and feelings—to be ourselves, taking ourselves to be this video to which the attention is riveted. Stillness reveals that we are the silent, vast awareness in which the video is playing. To glimpse this fundamental truth is to be liberated, to be set free....

Wait! Wait! Don't put this article down! I suspect that I just lost or am about to lose

about 99.9% of readers whose knee jerk reaction is, “Well I tried meditating, but I’m no good at it because I’m a thinker, not a mediator. I simply can’t ‘shut down’ my mind.”

Relax. None of us can. Not even Martin Laird. He admits as much in his book. “Getting rid of thoughts” is neither the purpose nor, more importantly, the method of contemplative practice. In fact, for all of us (meaning all people on the planet, including the Dalai Lama), that will never be the outcome. Ridding ourselves of thoughts is impossible because the very nature of the mind is to think. If I tell you, “Do not think of a pink rhinoceros,” what do you immediately think of? See? Laird observes that the more one tries to fight the thoughts the stronger they become, which is why most people give up immediately and conclude that they are hopeless at meditation.

While we cannot silence the mind, we can begin to observe the thinking that never shuts off. This is the true nature of contemplation, whether practiced by a monk or an attorney. These thoughts, feelings, ideas, fears, and afflictive emotions are the weather patterns of our lives. But they are not us. Once we begin to observe these weather patterns (by refocusing our attention on our breath, for example), we will start identifying with them less. And as we start to put some distance between ourselves and our thoughts, we will find that the more we disidentify from whatever happens to be going on in our heads in any given moment, the less we will suffer.

Yes, each of us suffers. As William Shafer observes in *Roaming Free Inside the Cage*, when our ego structure was formed in early childhood, it got cut off from our original source of peace, joy, and energy that is the very nature of the mountain, as we increasingly became identified with the weather patterns. Our ego searches for that missing peace, joy and energy, mistakenly believing that they lie somewhere out there, outside of us. “So [we keep] trying to find alternative sources of peace, joy and energy but [we] cannot, and this is why, no matter how much we learn, how successful we are, or how many friends we have, we continue to suffer. The ego may have helped us survive the pain and traumas of childhood and get on with life’s journey, but it can never carry us home.”

Ironically, the more we strive,² often the greater we suffer. We create running commentaries in our heads about all kinds of

things: our underlying suffering, our reactions to it, judgment of ourselves, our inability to fix it [whatever “it” is], our perceptions that other people are really causing the weather patterns... “if only they behaved properly, we would not be fixated on this weather....” You get my point. But while we may be acutely aware of our suffering, we are largely unconscious of this relentless firestorm raging in our heads that is literally feeding and fueling our suffering. It is like computer bots running their scans and algorithms. It happens automatically, unconsciously.

The good news is that we do not have to rewire our inner circuitry, which would be a daunting task. Instead the goal is to become more and more identified with the mountain and less and less identified with the weather patterns appearing upon it. Laird does a remarkable job in just a few pages of normalizing this universal experience of life and explaining the gateways through which we pass with a contemplative practice. As we become more skilled at quietly observing the commentary and returning our focus and attention to breath and a repeated word, we slowly shift from victim to witness. And therein lies our freedom.

So, why does all this matter? Why does it matter for lawyers and our profession in particular? Forget productivity. Forget managing risk. Just for a moment, I beg you, please put these familiar, laudable goals aside. Yes, getting some distance from our frantic, busy, crazy minds will dramatically help us to be more productive, more effective, and less “at-risk” as attorneys, but that is not why I am writing this article. From my vantage point, I see a pattern with much bigger implications.

At the recent national conference of the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs, I heard a very young widow tell the story of meeting her husband in law school. She showed us a honeymoon photo from their African photo safari trip. They graduated law school and passed the bar, each of them securing great jobs. He got a job at a law firm where he had been employed in a non-legal administrative position before going to law school. It was his first choice and his dream to work at this firm. Two months into his employment, he mentioned in passing at dinner one night that he was not sure he liked practicing law, that it was not what he expected or thought it would be. Two weeks later he killed himself.³

One has to ask, what *exactly* is going on

here? This is not the typical situation we hear about lawyers who’ve been in practice for years, who have become so run down that they have moved beyond compassion fatigue into burnout and severe depression and one night they get blind drunk and kill themselves in a fit of drunken (i.e., uninhibited) despair. This young man did not have a drinking problem. He had no personal or family history of depression. While I never met him, I will go out on a limb and postulate that he was not depressed; rather, he was disillusioned. His “strategy of acquisition” (marriage, becoming a lawyer, dream job at his first-choice firm) which he thought would make him “feel happy” (the “alternative sources of energy, peace and joy” that Shafer noted) did not work.

So, then, what’s the point of all of this? Of being lawyers? Of simply being? Can you follow the thinking? In my view, this is not what we think of as a true mental health problem; it is more an existential crisis.

Several years ago I attended one of our lawyer support group meetings. One of the lawyers in the group was getting ready to travel abroad and had misplaced his passport. He had searched high and low and had not yet found it. From what I recall the trip was quickly approaching and there was not time to get another passport. As he reported his predicament, he finished by saying, “I’m freaking out.” He paused, and with some emphasis then said, “Or rather, I am noticing that I’m freaking out.” Everybody laughed, as did he. The difference between his first sentence and his second sentence may seem minuscule. It is actually huge. In fact, the difference is so monumental, it accounts for why this lawyer was able to laugh at the situation. He was, precisely as Laird describes it, moving from victim to witness. (He found the passport, by the way.)

A lawyer approached me after a CLE talk one day and asked, “Will I still get irritated if I meditate?” I was able to honestly answer, “Absolutely.” You will still get irritated. But what will happen is that you will notice you are getting irritated. The initial irritation is what it is. It’s our immediate reaction to the stimulus. But then the running commentary kicks in and we become agitated and more irritated that the person has irritated us. Maybe we feel they have wasted our time or are not performing in some way we expected. The part of us that’s ramping up the story and whipping things up emotionally is the

ego/false self. The part of us that can notice the initial irritation is not that; it is something deeper. By definition, the one observing the irritation cannot be identified with the irritation. Just that little gap of space gives us greater agency of choice about how to respond to a situation.

The reason that people who have some form of contemplative practice seem calmer and less reactive to life is not because they are somehow less affected by life. They still have the same ups and downs, twists and turns, joys and disappointments that we all do because that is the nature of life. And they still have feelings and reactions to these life events. What is different is that they can see them and meet them without going down the rabbit hole of obsessive, over-personalized thinking. They are not ruled by their feelings and reactions because they are not totally identified with them. Through a regular practice of observing the thoughts that never shut off, they are better able to meet these thoughts, feelings, and reactions as the mountain instead of as the cloud that is being swept up by a cyclone system. The word for this state of mind is equanimity.

There are many forms and methods of contemplative practice. Some are religious-based, others are not. The modern-day Christian contemplative prayer method differs from the transcendental meditation movement of the 1960s and 70s only in what word or phrase is repeated with the breath. Many people have found tools like the Enneagram⁴ extremely helpful in identifying the subtle (or not-so-subtle) tricks of the ego and then developing a greater awareness and ability to “catch ourselves in the act”—to more quickly see when we are caught in the special fixated thought pattern (i.e., weather pattern) associated with each personality type. This latter example is a form of active contemplation. Mindfulness is another powerful form of contemplative practice that helps us not only to identify when we have moved into unconscious, reactive mode, but also to practice techniques that better equip us to stay in a more conscious, responsive mode. As Laird notes, even the therapeutic techniques used in cognitive behavioral therapy, whereby we work to notice and modify repeated negative thoughts and behavioral patterns, is its own form of beginning contemplative practice—just the noticing. Although cognitive behavioral therapy is more about changing the

weather pattern on the mountain, from say a stormy day to a bright and sunny one, it certainly has its place and can serve as a good starting point for many of us.

Circling back to why this is so important, I believe the profession itself is currently in an existential crisis. The statistics of the toll this is taking on us cannot be denied, nor should it continue to be ignored. When you examine so many of the examples of lawyer suicide in North Carolina, much of the running theme involves lawyers who were too wrapped up in their ego, too wrapped up in their image, too wrapped up in chasing after external things that they thought would make them happy and didn't, too proud or image-oriented or self-sufficient to ask for help, accept help when it was offered, change jobs, change practice areas, take a sabbatical, the list goes on. At the Lawyer Assistance Program, we work with people on the individual level to help first calm the weather patterns. It might be that the next step is to change the weather pattern from stormy to dull clouds to sunny. Eventually, however, for anyone in any form of long-term recovery for any issue, we have to learn to identify more with the mountain if we want sustainable peace of mind, freedom, and joy.

In the fall of 2018, I was scheduled to give a CLE presentation with a colleague who is also a friend. The State Bar car I was driving broke down on the side of the highway. Forty minutes of calls later I had secured a ride and would be arriving within two or three minutes of the scheduled start time. On the phone with my co-presenter, after I rather frantically relayed what had happened, I said, “I'm freaking out.... Or rather, I am noticing that I'm freaking out.” We laughed and he said, “I'm not sure it works that way.” Without hesitation came my reply. “Actually, that's exactly how it works.”

Mediation and contemplative practice don't make us emotionally detached automations, unaffected by life, nor do they dull our experience of life. Rather these practices provide the trust, curiosity, and vulnerability to contact and experience life more fully and to feel more connected to the present moment. Many report experiencing this as contact with something more real. In so doing, it opens us up to much greater freedom precisely because we are less identified with the weather patterns. In time it begins to dissolve the illusion of separation that we have from our authentic selves, life, and from each

other. And then our lives can truly become our own.

It is not easy to find happiness in ourselves, and it not possible to find it elsewhere.

—Agnes Repplier, *The Treasure Chest* ■

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The North Carolina Lawyer Assistance Program is a confidential program of assistance for all North Carolina lawyers, judges, and law students, which helps address problems of stress, depression, alcoholism, addiction, or other problems that may impair a lawyer's ability to practice. For more information, go to nclap.org or call: Cathy Killian (Charlotte/areas west) at 704-910-2310, or Nicole Ellington (Raleigh/down east) at 919-719-9267.

Endnotes

1. Laird calls it strategies of acquisition and distraction to avoid the painful empty feeling of separation. In recovery circles people talk about grabbing for things on the outside to fill up something that feels missing on the inside. We grab money, scholarly degrees, power, prestige, alcohol, drugs, lovers, spouses, houses, food, cars, job promotions, control, approval, security, the list goes on. To clarify, I'm not talking about attorneys here. I'm talking about what nonattorneys share about in 12-step meetings.
2. I call it “doubling down.”
3. This is a different lawyer than the one who was the subject of another young widow's article, “Big Law Killed My Husband,” which was widely circulated earlier this year.
4. In its most basic application, the Enneagram is a personality typing system. What the Enneagram reveals, however, is our fixated point of attention—our special flavor of tunnel vision that limits a broader perspective (and causes us a lot of internal strife and pain). As one author notes, “The Enneagram does not put us in a box, it shows us the box we are already in—and the way out.” (Don Riso and Russ Hudson, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram*, Bantam Books, 1999). There are several schools that use the Enneagram for personal development including the Riso-Hudson School, The Enneagram Institute (enneagraminstitute.com), and the Palmer-Daniels School of the Enneagram (enneagram.com).

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