Leave Law, Change Practice, or Stay Put?

It Depends Which Part of You Is Deciding

Why knowing what you want and doing something about it are two different things

AN INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP FOR LAWYERS

Zachary Rothwell, PMHNP
The Unhappy Professional, PLLC
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Leave Law, Change Practice, or Stay Put?

A quick calibration

Close your eyes and picture a red apple.

Vivid image | Faint / conceptual | No image at all

Internal experience is not standardized.

People think, imagine, feel, and experience things differently. During today's exercises, there is no "right" way for something to show up.

2

The shape of the day

What brought you here? → A short exercise → Get curious about the data → Break → Bird's-eye view & deeper look

We are not looking for an algorithm. We are looking for information.

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Who This Is For

Whether the question is loud, quiet, or only visits sometimes.

"What if I left?"

Partner dreaming about opening a bakery

"What if I practiced differently?"

Associate tired of billables, considering in-house

"What if I stay put?"

Immigration Attorney who is pretty content with their career

If you feel settled, these ideas still travel well beyond career decisions.

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Before we go any further...

Just hands.

A lateral move or different area of law?

EASY FIRST

Staying put, but the thought still visits?

MIDDLE

Seriously imagined leaving law entirely?

HARDER

My experience with lawyers has shown these to be very common ponderings from time to time.

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How We'll Work

Confidentiality

Names, fields, details, and phrasing have been changed.

WOOCLAP

Your name is not attached to what you post.

You can always make a U-turn. Safety is part of what makes honest exploration possible.

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WOOCLAP

Join the Conversation

Take out your phone. Scan the code, or go to wooclap.com

ENTER WOOCLAP CODE: HJFBRZM

Anonymous. Nothing you post has your name attached.

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What Decision Have You Been Considering Making?

And Why?

Leave law	Change how you practice law	Stay in your current position

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What Decision Have You Been Considering Making? And Why?

Change how you practice law

I like being a lawyer. I hate my firm.

I like my practice area. I hate billable hours.

I want to go in-house.

I want to leave litigation but stay in law.

I want fewer hours even if I make less money.

I want to teach, mediate, do policy work, compliance, or something adjacent.

Leave law

I keep fantasizing about doing something completely different.

I have a business idea I cannot stop thinking about.

I want to work in a nonprofit or mission-driven role.

I want a job where I am not carrying other people's crises all day.

I sometimes fantasize about being laid off because then I would not have to choose.

I do not know what I would do instead. I just know I think about leaving.

Stay in your current position

I actually like my job, but I keep wondering whether I should want something more.

I am successful and comfortable, and that almost makes the question harder.

I want to stay, but I cannot keep working at this pace.

I want to know whether the problem is the job or me being exhausted.

I want to recommit instead of constantly keeping one foot out the door.

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What Action Have You Taken?

Even small actions count.

- Read job posts
- Logged into LinkedIn
- Redid your budget
- Talked to Spouse/Friends

What steps have you taken, or considered taking?

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What Action Have You Taken?

Looked at the market	Talked to people	Ran the numbers, changed the terms	Built, tested, or waited
Looked at job postings.	Had coffee with someone in another practice area.	Ran the numbers on how long savings would last.	Started a side business.
Logged into LinkedIn for the first time in years.	Asked a friend what in-house life is really like.	Redid the household budget.	Bought a domain name.
Updated a resume.	Called a former colleague who left law.	Started saving a runway fund.	Made a business plan.
Talked with a recruiter.	Asked a spouse or partner what they would think about a change.	Asked for fewer hours.	Took a vacation specifically to see whether I still wanted to leave afterward.
Applied for one job.	Talked with a mentor.	Asked for remote work.	Started therapy.
Interviewed.		Actually use my vacation time.	Did absolutely nothing except think about it repeatedly.
Turned down an offer.			

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What Challenges Have Shown Up?

"I'm not qualified."	*"We'd have to move."*	*"The pay cut is too big."*
SELF-DOUBT	LOGISTICS	GOLDEN HANDCUFFS

What got in the way?

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Two Layers of the Same Problem

OUTSIDE	INSIDE
Logistics / external	Personal / internal
Money Licensing Relocation Timing Actual constraints	Beliefs Fear Identity Loyalty What you feel you owe

We will respect the real logistics, and spend our time on the internal layer.

Hand Metaphor

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What Challenges Have Shown Up?

Money

Pay cut.

Golden handcuffs.

Mortgage or other fixed expenses.

Kids and tuition.

Health insurance.

Student loans.

I would lose equity, vesting, pension, or partnership track.

Logistics

Would have to move.

Spouse or partner cannot easily relocate.

Need to stay near family.

No obvious openings where I live.

I would need another license.

I would have to build a new referral network.

There is no clean exit date.

Self-doubt

What if I regret it?

What if I am not good at anything else?

What if I fail publicly?

What if people think I could not hack it?

I do not know who I am if I am not this kind of lawyer.

I would be junior again.

Am I qualified?

Guilt and loyalty

I worked too hard to get here to walk away.

My parents sacrificed for this.

People depend on me.

I feel selfish even thinking about it.

I should be grateful for what I have.

Every option has a downside, so I keep doing nothing.

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The Counter Story

Being acknowledged matters.

Everyone knows the feeling of standing at a counter while nobody sees you.

We are not solving anything yet.



“I see you.”

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More Than One Part Can Be True



"I want the ice cream."



"I want to get in shape."

Both can be you.

Yes, even the part thinking, "This guy is crazy asking lawyers to wave to their feelings."

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Wave to the Part of You That Experienced the Challenge

Find the challenge you named a minute ago.

Acknowledge it. Wave to it.



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We're All Set Up. Let's Jump In.

01 WOOCLAP	02 Intro Questions About What You're Exploring	03 Importance of Acknowledgment	04 Concept of Parts	05 Understand Sometimes Parts Compete

THIS IS

A guided exercise in self-observation

A way to notice what shows up
A way to get curious
A look at the gap between wanting and doing

THIS IS NOT

An Advice Lecture

An algorithm
Advice about what you should do
A public psychoanalysis session

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PUZZLE METAPHOR

Abstract on Purpose - Start With the Edges



Dump it out
You do not begin with the finished picture.

Turn pieces up
See what is actually there.

Find corners & edges
Build a little structure.

Let the picture emerge
Stay abstract long enough to learn something.

The pieces can be useful before you know what the whole picture means.

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EXERCISE

The Change You Keep Imagining

No right or wrong. Just notice.



LEAVE LAW
Walk away



CHANGE PRACTICE
Do law differently



STAY PUT
Decide to stay

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What Just Happened

Whatever surfaced in that exercise can be revealing. Not of what you should do, but of what might actually be running the show underneath your career decisions.

Relief	Panic	Guilt	Blankness	Grief

We are going to walk through each of these. They point to different things, and they tend to call for different responses.

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Feelings Are Information, Not Verdicts

More than one thing can be true at once.

"I'm relieved by this."

"Well, I'm panicking."



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SIGNAL

Relief

- Who noticed some relief?

HOW IT MAY HAVE SHOWN UP

- shoulders loosening
- a deep sigh
- a lighter feeling
- a cooler body
- a quieter mind
- an image or a few words

A POSSIBLE PART

Relief may signal that a part of you feels some pressure lifting.

A part may be responding to something it wants, needs, or has been missing.

Wave to the part that felt relief.

Another part may disagree. That is okay.

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RELIEF

Three Doors - Find and Wave To Your Parts



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The Practice Owner Who Exhaled

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Your body may tell you what your mind is too loyal to admit.

Relief can be the sound of something true arriving before your defenses can organize against it.

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SIGNAL

Panic

- Who felt panic creeping in?

HOW IT MAY HAVE SHOWN UP

- racing thoughts
- a flipbook of what could go wrong
- tightening in the body
- your stomach dropping

A POSSIBLE PART

Panic may signal that a part of you feels something important is at risk.

That part may be trying to protect something important.

Wave to the part that felt panic.

No need to figure out the risk yet.

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PANIC

Three Doors - Find and Wave To Your Parts



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The Partner Without a Name

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Your title can be what you do, or it can turn into who you are.
When it turns into who you are, leaving feels like disappearing.

The rest of you is not gone. It is unattended.

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SIGNAL

Guilt

- Who felt guilt flood in?

HOW IT MAY HAVE SHOWN UP

- a specific face or name
- a stomach flip
- an image of your younger self
- an electric current through the body

A POSSIBLE PART

Guilt may signal that a part of you believes it's doing something wrong or letting someone down.

That belief may involve responsibility, loyalty, or an expectation about what you owe.

Wave to the part that feels guilt.

Notice if it arrived right after relief.

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GUILT

Three Doors - Find and Wave To Your Parts



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Wooclap

How Does Guilt Show Up For You?

What is the dialogue you hear?
What are the images that you see?
How do you feel it in the body?

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Sometimes guilt is a moral compass. Sometimes it's an old rule telling you what you're allowed to want or what you're supposed to do.

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SIGNAL

Blankness

- Earlier, some of you felt nothing.

HOW IT MAY HAVE SHOWN UP

- nothing much at all
- static, fog, or numbness
- a flat, neutral calm
- trouble even picturing the change
- a shrug

ONE POSSIBLE PART

A Part at Peace

You may simply be content. Nothing needs further investigation.

ANOTHER POSSIBLE PART

A Disconnected Part

If feeling everything is too much, a part may disconnect to keep functioning.

Wave to whatever was—or was not—there. No need to force a feeling.

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BLANKNESS

You Chose a Door. The Feeling Never Came.



Leave law

Blankness.



Change practice

Blankness.



Stay put

Blankness.

We can make choices without always being aware of the emotional state it creates.

Wave To It.

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The Government Attorney Who Went with the Flow

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Feeling nothing does not mean nothing is there. An emotion can run outside your awareness and still guide what you do.

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SIGNAL

Grief

- Who felt sadness or grief show up?

HOW IT MAY HAVE SHOWN UP

- heaviness
- eyes welling up
- a lump in the throat
- a sinking feeling
- a memory, image, or person
- a sense of something slipping away

A POSSIBLE PART

Grief may signal that a part of you is experiencing a loss.

A part may be responding to something it values: a person, a place, a future, or a version of yourself.

Wave to the part that felt grief.

We can recognize the loss without deciding what to do yet.

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GRIEF

Three Doors - Find and Wave To Your Parts



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Grief does not need to be fixed. It needs to be honored.

Sadness that is seen can settle into peace. Sadness that is not seen can become an open wound.

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GO INWARD FOR A MOMENT

What did you notice? Was it one feeling, or a mix?

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Leave Law, Change Practice, or Stay Put?

↓

The Question Underneath the Question

↓

Am I acknowledging all of who I am?

Until that question gets some honest attention, the decision tends to keep circling.

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BREAK

WHEN WE RETURN

Everything you just felt was real.

That does not make it a verdict.

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AFTER THE BREAK

Everything That Showed Up Today Was Real.

What we experienced in this room deserves to be acknowledged.

Feelings	Parts	Body sensations	Beliefs	Imagery

The experiences were real, but what do we do with that now?

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THE WEIGHT WE CARRY

Life Can Be Hard. So Can Practicing Law.

Different sources of pressure. One person living with all of them.

The Practice of Law	Life Outside Law
• Hard cases, conflict, and clients in distress	• Parenting, caregiving, and relationships
• High stakes and responsibility	• Health, financial concerns, and daily demands
• Perfectionism and unforgiving standards	• Grief, disappointment, and other losses
• Relentless expectations and availability	• Old expectations and familiar roles
• Exposure to suffering and difficult outcomes	• The things we rarely talk about at work

We do not have one nervous system for work and another for life.

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THREE WAYS A BURDEN MAY BE CARRIED

Where Does the Weight Go?

A temporary strategy for getting through something is not always the same as working through it.

Compartmentalize	Shows Up Elsewhere	Process
• Push it out of your mind	• Anxiety or depression	• Acknowledge the experience
• Ignore it	• Physical pain or symptoms	• Feel and understand it
• Refute its legitimacy	• Addictions	• Talk it through
• Override it with willpower	• Anger toward others	• Grieve what was lost
• Focus on something else	• Vent or lash out	• Explore its meaning
• Stay busy or doomscroll	• Numb or distract	• Address underlying needs
• Pretend it is not there	• Tension that follows us home	• Integrate what happened

Out of awareness does not necessarily mean out of the picture.

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WHAT THE WEIGHT CAN DO

Effects of Accumulated Stress on the Nervous System

Some changes are physical. Others appear in how we feel, think, and respond.

Body	Emotions	Thinking
• Waking at 3 a.m. thinking about a case	• A shorter fuse	• Anticipating the next crisis
• Exhaustion that a weekend does not fix	• Feeling on edge even at home	• Every request starts to feel urgent
• Headaches or jaw and shoulder tension	• Less patience with people we love	• Difficulty switching off
• Stomach complaints and restless sleep	• Less enjoyment in things that used to restore us	• Fewer possibilities seem workable

Burnout, life strain, old burdens, or some combination?

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THE MARATHON

You can successfully run a marathon.

But you ask more of your mind and body at mile 22 than you do at mile 1.

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SIGNAL / STATIC

Hearing Yourself More Clearly

SIGNAL

What is genuinely yours

- Authentic desire
- A genuine need
- A deeper truth
- A real value
- A direction that fits



"Dialed in"

STATIC

What can interfere with its meaning

- Exhaustion / chronic strain
- Old rules and memories
- Inherited standards
- Other people's expectations
- Pressure to prove yourself

The question is not just what you feel. It is what is shaping what you feel and how you interpret it.

A genuinely right decision may still provoke anxiety, guilt, or grief.

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OUR STATE CHANGES OUR RESPONSE

What State Are Your Parts In?

The same situation can look very different from a different internal state.



EVERYTHING FEELS URGENT



THERE IS ROOM TO CONSIDER

Your internal state can change your response even when the facts have not changed.

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MORE ROOM FOR MORE THAN ONE VOICE

Invite Your Parts to the Picnic



GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER • WHAT COMMON GOALS DO YOU HAVE • WHAT COMMON CHALLENGES ARE YOU FACING

These are not literal people inside you—just illustrations of different needs, fears, and priorities.

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RETURN TO THE THREE DOORS

What If You Weren't Carrying So Much?

If some of what you were carrying became lighter, might you see your options differently?



The same door? | A different door? | More peace either way?

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The Litigator Who Thought She Was Done

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Be cautious about permanent decisions made from a temporary state of overwhelm.

Reduce the overload. Then see what remains.

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As We Wrap Up, Let's Review

1

Be Curious

Notice what shows up: feelings, parts, body sensations, beliefs, and images. Explore what they might be telling you, what you are carrying, and which old rules or expectations may be shaping how you interpret them.

We Started Here Today

2

Recalibrate

Process the accumulated weight. Address what the work itself has put on your nervous system. This is where modalities like EMDR, IFS, and psychodynamic therapy can help.

Explore practical ways to reduce stress via exercise, hobbies, financial planning, and community.

3

Choose

Make decisions from a different internal state. One where the weight has lifted and the old patterns are visible. From there, you are far better positioned to trust the direction.

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I do not know what your next move should be. Whether you stay, go, leave law altogether, or redefine your relationship with it.

What I have observed is that after curiosity and recalibration, people tend to trust their choices differently. And action tends to follow trust.

Zachary Rothwell, PMHNP

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Resources

Not every problem responds to the same intervention. Match the issue to the resource.

NC LAP

Lawyer-specific support. Recovery-sensitive guidance. A place to be heard without performing professionalism.

Financial planning

For the numbers. Budgets, timelines, runway. Separating real constraints from inherited assumptions.

Career counseling

For logistics: lateral moves, adjacent roles, and the concrete steps a transition requires.

Mentorship

For reality-testing. Learning what different paths actually look like from people who have walked them.

Peer community

For honesty, shared experience, and the relief of not having to explain what it is like.

Therapy

For the belief systems, the nervous system weight, and the roots. Find someone who understands the profession.

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THE ROLE PSYCHOTHERAPY CAN PLAY

What Showed Up		What Deeper Work Might Explore
Panic	A part may sense something important is at risk.	What feels threatened, and what has this part learned to fear?
Guilt	A part may believe it is doing something wrong or letting someone down.	Is this a genuine value, an old rule, or someone else's expectation?
Relief	A part may feel pressure lifting or recognize something it wants.	Is this relief from accumulated strain, a genuine desire, or both?
Blankness	There may be contentment or disconnection.	Is there genuine peace here, or has something become difficult to feel?
Grief	A part may be responding to something deeply valued or lost.	What person, identity, possibility, or imagined future might you be mourning?

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The gap between wanting a different life and living one is rarely an information problem.

Sometimes it is about what you have been carrying, what you learned to believe, and whether every part of you has had a voice in the decision.

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Questions

Zachary Rothwell, PMHNP
The Unhappy Professional, PLLC
unhappyprofessional.com

Please see me for the referral handout.

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