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A Guide for the Perplexed: The Unorthodox View of Studying Law

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Without passion or purpose in your undertakings, longevity in them is rare. Passion soothes the pain of difficulties encountered whilst purpose fuels continual momentum forward to success.¹

Misinformation abounds when it comes to considering your future career post-high school. Between massive physiological change, social pressures, parents and homework, the thought of being asked mid-teens about what you would like to be doing when you are 40 is somewhat an irrational enterprise. Sadly that is the nature of the beast. This article is for those considering studying law. It covers the realities of studying law, tips for success and issues to consider before making your decision on what is sometimes an unjustifiably difficult academic enterprise.

Why study law?

In the Autumn edition of *Legal Eagle* this quandary was raised. The answer, though simple, must be pondered by the individual alone with consideration of the opening quote by Olympian, and all-round good egg, Lara Davenport: are you passionate about law, enough to weather the many storms?

Passion and its fuel

Passion is a powerful emotion that can be fuelled by love, desire, anger and hatred. All are equally motivating, none better or worse. For the aspiring law student passion for a particular purpose or cause within society is a good place to start when considering whether or not law is for you. Personally, law was a way to advance the changes in social causes like environmental and animal protection, as well as human rights, in a way that my previous career as a journalist could not. My passions were fuelled strongly by anger, which gained some criticism, yet whatever the fuel, if it gets you moving forward constructively, use it.

Without passion for the law, its judicial, social and political process, as well as its implications for our society, life within law school and onward into practice becomes monumentally tedious. There are slews of twenty-something lawyers that burn out because they entered law for the wrong reasons, due to parental pressure or reciprocation of career, monetary reward, social prestige or just because they got good marks at school. Money and power rarely motivate with longevity.

Who can study law?

Anyone! Time proves very nicely that ordinary marks are no indicator of ability. Einstein was a fellow dyslexic and failed maths. Gone are the days when Grade Point Averages decided your tertiary fate. Various options are now available for the individual to study law regardless of school leaving marks. This is great news for those who have the passion and commitment for law but not the academic gusto on paper. In the immortal words of Jagger, ‘you can’t always get what you want, but if you try sometimes, you get what you need.’²

Like all options, they tend to resemble budget airlines where you can get to your destination, though you may have to bare some inconvenience, add on expenses and delays. But the journey is part of the learning experience.

If you have the passion for law but are not up in the top Grade Point Average ranks, options like a private university could be for you. Now through FEE-HELP the financial burden is delayed like HECS.

Alternatively, entering law at a postgraduate level at both public and private universities is a very good option. Postgraduate entry to law is common in most countries, the simple fact that entrants are a little older or a little wiser makes all the difference in their legal studies compared to entry straight from school. The only requirement is any undergraduate degree, and then you are freely welcome to apply for, and may succeed in gaining admission to a law school to complete the eloquently named *Juris Doctor*. Like the budget airlines, if you do not mind the slight diversion and a delay for a while, you can gain access to where you want to go. Oh, and by the way, you want to hope that your baggage comes with you!!!

Law School and all its joys

Keeping the analogy of budget airlines alive (ironically I write this in an airport where my flight has been cancelled, so much for \$50 to Adelaide, but I will get there in the end) – everyone comes to law school with baggage. If not, they soon gain it. Exams and study-related issues unanimously are rated as the most difficult hurdles of law school. I disagree. The most difficult hurdle at law school is life.

Life is difficult. Such difficulties, pains and inconveniences, in an age where the flag of a generation is emblazoned with ‘give me convenience or give me death’ flies high over the ramparts, must be accepted as early as possible. The fairytale of easy won success, fame and fortune is just that, a fairytale. Now that that has been addressed we can move on...

From school-leaving age until you complete your initial undergraduate degree, roughly 18 to 22, you undertake the steepest learning curve in your evolution as an animal – socially, psychologically and sexually. This learning curve consists rarely of academic issues taught in lectures, though they have the greatest impacts on them at times. At university, especially if you move out of home and gain independence for the first time, you discover the pains as well as joys of love, liberty and the pursuit of happy hour.

The trials and tribulations of growing up impact roundly upon your academic life; issues of love, death, sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll will affect your studies. These really are fundamental to whether law school is steady sailing or a tormented sea of despair. Independence for the first time, the age of majority and new freedoms ensure that a boozy late night, trouble with the girlfriend/boyfriend and general disorganisation will eventually catch up.

Smooth sailing through troubled waters

Nothing is easy. But law school is really not that tough. Seriously! If you can read and write and pass year 10, law school is a reality if you really want it. What makes or breaks any student, life issues aside, is organisation. Law school requires organisation and prioritisation. This is the essence of making law a more palatable enterprise.

The major priorities whilst at law school are studies, work, exercise and play. Without a balance of all four elements there is a tendency to see law students who have an impressive academic record yet remain the least balanced and least employable with longevity in law as they have no social skills. No matter how passionate you are about law, you need a break to refresh and cleanse the mind.

1. Studies

Organisation makes studying palatable. Studying for hour upon hour gets to a point of diminishing returns, not to mention does little for your sanity or self esteem. Your law degree provides a foundation of your legal knowledge not a final lump sum. Law is a lifelong pursuit of patience and education. Entering the workforce you are not expected to know much, you will build your knowledge in practice.

To manage your studies, build a timetable like you had at school that shows classes, review sessions, sports and homework. Law generally only requires 12 contact hours a week enabling you plenty of time outside of class to review, prepare and consolidate your class knowledge. Start assignments when you are issued them to get them done sooner. At state universities you have the luxury of holiday

breaks. At private schools you do not. But the principles are the same: the sooner the work is done, the sooner you can play, work or train.

Use tutorials as a place to learn. Prepare for the tute the best you can by reviewing lecture slides, reading what is prescribed, gaining a solid understanding of the relevant case law or legislation, to relate them back to the tute questions.

Tutorial preparation should take around three to four hours per tutorial. Use the tutes to expand and consolidate your knowledge. If you are unsure about anything, ask, that is what you are at university for. It is guaranteed that if you do not understand neither do some others, despite the academic posturing and bravado that they spew forth.

Law school comes with pressure. Accepting pressure and working to avoid it by being organised ensures that when it is time for finals or assignment deadlines you are ready to roll, work completed, queries settled, ready to perform. As a lawyer that is your role, to perform. If you find the pressure of law school taxing, your life in the practicing world will be unforgivable and difficult as clients expect results.

Know your lecturers. If you take an interest in them and their subject they take an interest in you. Remember, it is who you know in this game. Knowing your lecturers gives you access to their knowledge. Lecturers love a keen student, not a suck up, but an enthusiastic, well-balanced, diverse student. The extra tips you gain from that friendship pay dividends in your academic and professional life.

Studying alone is the best way to get your work done. Far too many students waste time in the library guising group study sessions as idle gossip. Turn off your internet, phone,



find somewhere quiet, do the work and get on with your day. An hour of constructive study is more useful than 10 where 80% of the time is spent being social. In exams you are alone, so you may as well study alone, using group sessions as a fun refresher.

2. Work

In the Book of Thessalonians it stated that ‘if you don’t work, you don’t eat.’³ Working shows a commitment to the community through tax and to yourself through having some independence over your finances. Having your own hard won money builds your general work ethic. Student jobs are not glamorous but teach the value of money, customer service, time management and working within society’s diversity.

Many claim law school is too demanding to warrant a job, yet a 22 year old law graduate who has never worked in fast food, waiting tables, scrubbing floors or pulling beers may be off-putting to future employers. It may indicate precociousness and/or a lack of commitment. Student jobs give a bottom up approach to work. Everyone has to start at the bottom, even you. A smart choice is to work in a café that is haunted by the law firm you like. Making their daily coffee is a great opportunity to meet all the key players, making access to future clerkships or employment easier. Remember, it is who you know...

Clerkships are a great opportunity to gain some legal experience. Try a variety of areas of law. If nothing else it will teach you where you do not want to practice. Big law firms have a mark of prestige, though you may have less access to the front-line decision makers. Small firms, especially in underprivileged areas, are more intimate and get you closer to the action.

3. Exercise

Exercise is really simple: left foot, right foot in quick succession. You can do it with friends, alone, in the park, at the beach, in the pool, on a bike, in the gym when it’s day, night, hot or cold. You get all the benefits of exercise physiologically and psychologically, plus, in your first year at uni, sport and gym classes are a great way to meet like-minded friends or colleagues. Blaming university food and lack of time for putting on weight in your first year is an infamous excuse. Most university students stop playing sport, drive everywhere, booze too much, eat poorly and get too cosy in a relationship so the spare tyre they put on is their fault.

If you need to find time, ask yourself where you lost it or is it an excuse because you are disorganised? An hour a day of exercise is a minimum. There are iPods, access to 24 hour gyms, uni gyms or just pound the pavement, jump in the pool or where ever, just get out there. Play a social sport, join a medieval combat association, anything. Exercise gives the young law student or practitioner time to unwind, meditate on issues of the day and feel good from the chemical hit induced.

4. Play

The last element of law school that must be in harmony is play. Time to do the things you love, see the people you want to see and enjoy the reward of having completed your day’s studies, work and exercise.

For many students this element is far out of balance, swinging to its extreme ends of too much play not enough

work or too much work and no play. Student life tends to be dominated by people either over-exerting their social life or their time in the library. Play must be a well defined element in balance with the other three previously mentioned.

University provides a fantastic array of play activities, from parties and functions to sports, clubs, societies and so forth. Enjoy this time to develop your interests. Employers will not just look at your law-related interests, such as mootings or the law students association but everything about you. Remember good results alone do not always maketh the greatest employee. Hobbies and interests define the individual. They show employers what you are like when you are not at work. If you are dull at home, most likely you will be dull at work and that is rarely a profitable combination for employers.

Key points for prospering Mentors

Find someone within the faculty who you admire and get to know them, from a staff member to a more senior student. Like a coach, a mentor can help you on your way to success in law. Someone who has as many failures as successes in what they do is a good start. Personal mentors at law school have introduced me to a new view on law, they inspire, challenge, hold you accountable and are great sounding boards for those many moments of doubt.

Curiosity

If in doubt after attempting something, ask. No-one, from lecturers, mentors or people with greater knowledge, will begrudge an intelligent question if you are unsure. Curiosity is a key skill that makes students learn more because they are proactive. Curiosity aspires the individual to greater heights. A good law student or any student, life long, should be curious about the law, the natural world, the universe and humanity, not just for their professional career but for understanding their role in society and the cosmos in general.

Failure

Kerry Packer said that he was the most successful because he made more mistakes than everyone else.⁴ You will fail in life, university, professionally, in relationships, financially and in many aspects of life. Greet failure with the warmth it deserves, learn from it, never repeat it and move on. Never be afraid to fail if you have tried your best because you will learn from those moments more than anything else. If failure worries you then it revokes passion for what you do. Passion will fuel you through a fear of failure.

A key note on failure too. If others criticise your failure unconstructively, move them on. If others offer you constructive criticism, especially lecturers or mentors, take it.

If you honestly get into law and loathe it, not because it gets a bit tough, is dry or requires a bit of effort, but loathe it with a passion, then pull out. You are not failing; it is just not for you. Learning what you do not like is one of life’s important battles. Better to do it at 18 than 40. Remember, do what you are passionate about within reason and the rest will follow.

Help

If you need help ask for it, not just academically but in life. As we know, life sometimes gets in the way of university.

Issues of depression, sexual orientation and addiction occur in university students, especially those living away from home, as young minds develop and grow. If you feel like you are falling in a hole or you are in need of someone to talk to, find yourself a good doctor and seek counsel. Only the foolish walk alone.

Independence

If given the chance, study away from home, move interstate or out of home. Enjoy the freedom, responsibility and challenges that come with life away from the folks. And, if you can, even get out of Australia for a while. Study abroad is a wonderful learning experience in every respect of your education.

Chutzpah

Law and life requires you to make decisions and live with the consequences. Read widely on everything, learn about your personal bias and that of others and learn to take a punch. With that in mind, make a calculated decision, back yourself and run with it.

Where to from here?

Law school is not the bogey man it is made out to be if you have a little organisation, good people around you and a balanced life. If you are passionate about law or its issues (from human rights and the environment, to politics and accessing justice) then, as a degree, law enables you to work within those realms. Law is not a one way ticket to instant employment, money, power and social status – if these are your driving forces then instead consider marrying into royalty. Law is a hard road of consistency, patience and balance. Success comes in varying forms, most of them not fiscally related. As we opened with in this article, passion will fuel you to have purpose and purpose creates momentum, agitation and opportunities. Patience with purpose and passion will always bring results as will accessing life in its ups as well as downs. To close with, consider these words from Rowan Atkinson:

I, on the other hand, am a fully-rounded human being, with a degree from the University of Life, a diploma from the School of Hard Knocks, and three gold stars from the Kindergarten of Getting the **** Kicked Out of Me.⁵

Enjoy the journey into law no matter where it leads you.

References

- ¹ Interview with Lara Davenport (Bond University, 19 July 2010).
- ² Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, 'You Can't Always Get What You Want', *Let it Bleed* (1969).
- ³ 2 *Thessalonians* 3:10 (New International Version).
- ⁴ Paul Barry, *The Rise and Rise of Kerry Packer* (1993).
- ⁵ Rowan Atkinson, cited at http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/r/rowan_atkinson.html on 19 July 2010.

Time for reflection

Joel agrees with Lara Davenport that passion is important to succeed. What is your passion or what drives you to succeed? How do you go about achieving success in what you do? Do you agree or disagree with Joel's list of points for prospering?