

INTRODUCTION

“In a chronically leaking boat, energy devoted to changing vessels is more productive than energy devoted to patching leaks.”

- Warren Buffett

I recently watched a TED talk by relationship therapist Esther Perel. She talks about the unrealistic burden we tend to place on marriage (or long-term romantic partnerships) in a day and age where one person is suddenly expected to fill two opposing needs - our need for safety as well as our need for desire:

“We come to one person and we basically are asking them to give us what once an entire village used to provide. Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge. Give me novelty, give me familiarity. Give me predictability, give me surprise.”

She discusses the couple’s challenge to keep intimacy alive as they get further into the territory of the familiar (where apparently, desire goes to die). It resonated with me because it links to what I’ve noticed with the relationship that many millennials try to build with their careers.

Perel discusses how marriage used to be a contractual agreement - we’ll share property, we’ll share kids, we’ll

share a social status. Nowadays, it has shifted: the person you marry is expected to still remain your partner in all those things, but they are also expected to be your family and fantasy and anchor and adventure all at once.

Similarly, a job used to be a long-term arrangement whereby you provided skills and your employer provided compensation for said skills - end of story. Today's workplace seems to be much more than just a marketplace. For millennials, 'work' has almost taken on a spiritual obligation - it has become a place where we are meant to find meaning and redeem not only ourselves but also the world around us.

I spent the past few years producing content and events for Escape the City ("Escape"), a global community for corporate professionals who want to 'do something different' with their careers. During that time, I watched hundreds of high achievers go through the complex process of career change.

Their intelligence, which had served them so well up until this point, often caused them to second-guess their intuition and rationalise the feeling that they were on the wrong career path. The type of person I tended to meet through our Escape the City member base was often a well-educated young professional based in a fiercely competitive big city like London or New York; far from the community where they grew up. They're intellectually curious, question traditional institutions and want to 'make a difference', but they struggle with knowing how to do so.

The conversations I had with members often mirrored the dichotomy that Perel discusses ("I want adventure, but also give me security"). I often met the lawyer who hits pause to spend six months volunteering in Uganda, the banker

who yearns to transition into start-ups, and the advertising executive who moonlights with his food blog.

Their day jobs feed their need for comfort and security and the adventures they dabble in feed their need for transcendence and exploration. To try and reconcile the two into a single job seems to be a similar exercise to building a marriage where a partner is a best friend as well as an erotic fantasy. Possible - yes. A given? Not necessarily.

It is hard - if not impossible - to (immediately) generate a generous salary from volunteering, starting a business, or a blog. I meet a lot of high achievers who suddenly morph into anti-careerists. As Marilyn Monroe said, "A career is wonderful thing, but you can't snuggle up to it on a cold night."

Yes, she's right. However, a regular income is also necessary to survival. To deny that is to live in an adolescent fantasy world, and the question that often trips up a lot of our members is how to translate their fantasies into a reality that pays the rent.

They want a meaningful job, but what if they don't want to give up their quality of life? They want the freedom of running a business but how can they do it without the risk? They want to switch industries but can they do it without starting at the bottom all over again?

The struggle often dissipates when we apply the same reality check that Perel applies to relationships: our day jobs were never meant to be the singular, primary source of meaning in our lives. Where one finds meaning is a deeply personal and unique matrix. While a job can strengthen self-esteem or provide a sense of belonging to an industry or field, it

was never meant to replace endorphins, the loyalty of close friends, intimacy, laughing until your stomach cramps, or the feeling of gazing into a starry night sky.

Perhaps we are meant to have hobbies and passions that never translate into full-time jobs (at least not straight away). We have multiple selves within us. Some are lucky enough to reconcile the playful self and the working self into one role - others have a job in order to pay the rent and their true fulfillment comes from family, friends, and passions outside of their day job. To place too much pressure on our job to provide us with fulfillment that it was never meant to provide can overshadow the opportunity to find meaning in a range of activities and relationships.

When I think of the most fulfilled people I know, they enjoy their day jobs but they aren't enslaved by them. They also derive a huge amount of meaning and joy from their personal relationships. They exercise regularly. They have creative outlets but they also manage to pay the rent.

When I heard Escape members complaining about their jobs, I questioned whether it was really their job that was the problem, or whether it was a deeper feeling of invisibility and powerlessness that they struggled with in their lives outside of work (that job-switching wasn't necessarily going to fix). They seemed to be longing for a metaphorical neighbourhood that doesn't exist, for a holistic sense of feeling like they belong to their own lives.

Having said all this, I am not arguing that we should give up on the idea of love - if anything, I am a firm believer and fighter *for* love - for finding work you love. My point is that love is a journey that is made much easier when expectations are realistic.

By no means am I underestimating the powerful clarity that can come with feeling like you've found your mission, but in my mind, that is a different thing to a day job. They're related, but it's like true love and long-lasting marriage - one does not necessarily imply the other. And just like in a romantic relationship, the less pressure we put on a day job to live up to unrealistic expectations, the more we become able to enjoy it for what it is, rather than what we wish it could be.

However, there is a difference between not being passionate about your day job, and being downright miserable. If your job is costing you more than it's giving you, it might be time to leave.

WHY LAWYERS CAN'T LEAVE

I noticed specific barriers that seem to exist for lawyers in the Escape community, illustrated in their own words below. You'll see that the same barriers crop up in all of the stories we hear about, over and over again.

"The main problem is not being sure what to do next."

The thing stopping him from quitting tomorrow is being unsure what to do next, and the drop in income. He wants to leave the law because he doesn't think he is very good at it - he doesn't particularly enjoy it and in the specialism he is in, there doesn't seem to be scope for flexible, part time or contract working.

There was no particular turning point - he just never really enjoyed law. He would be reluctant to leave without a plan and his main problem is not being sure what to do next.

*“You don’t focus on the bigger picture,
just accomplishing each stage.”*

She is still developing a business idea and finds that the biggest hurdle to quitting is finding the right thing to do. She wants to leave the law because it seems to suffocate her creativity and does not enable her to play to her strengths.

She knew that she wanted to leave upon qualification, but that was years ago. Up until then, she was focused on the series of steps to go through (law school, each six month seat of training contract, qualification) without time to focus on the bigger picture, just on accomplishing each stage. Only after she had qualified did she start to question whether law was actually what she wanted to do.

“The biggest obstacle is probably financial uncertainty.”

She is not actively looking to leave the law at the moment, although she is open to new opportunities and inspiration. She came to an Escape event having just been made redundant from a firm where she was not happy anyway. She had only worked at one law firm. Given the time and effort that had gone into training, she wanted to try another firm before calling it a day.

She is much happier at the current firm but does not plan to stay a lawyer forever. The biggest obstacle is financial uncertainty as her husband works for a start-up and his financial position isn’t set in stone right now.

“I wouldn’t want to leave without a definite plan.”

Her game plan is to stay where she is while she is happy and satisfied with what she is doing but to keep an eye out

for other interesting opportunities, and move on if she is not happy.

If she were to leave, she would want some form of income lined up, even just to pay the bills, along with a definite plan of what she wanted to do and the steps she intended to take to get there. Sometimes she wonders how she has ended up here.

*“When you’ve invested a lot of time and energy,
it becomes hard to change direction.”*

Being a lawyer wasn’t always his dream – he saw it more as a stepping-stone. The thing stopping him from quitting tomorrow is making sure he has a solid plan in place – a holding job, and enough savings to keep him going.

The biggest hurdles to quitting are mainly financial – mortgage payments and other obligations. There are also other personal considerations: when you’ve invested a lot of time and energy into something, it becomes hard to change direction.

He wants to leave law because he doesn’t find it fulfilling to be working until at least 9pm every evening, more often later, with no stake in what he is doing. He knew he wanted to leave about six months after qualification, during a busy period.

He’s at a point where he can’t understand why he’s doing what he is doing. He is planning to save some additional funds and would ideally like to move into a quasi-legal role that is well paid but more interesting.

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

In my final year of my arts degree at university, I won seed funding to pursue a startup idea with my best friend. This introduced me to the world of digital media and startups. Two years later, I grew tired of the emotional rollercoaster and financial insecurity of the entrepreneurial life, so I decided to start looking into getting a ‘real job’ by going to law school.

I dropped out of law school after three weeks because it was impossible to ignore the evidence that I would truly suck as a lawyer. As early on as my first Torts class, it became crystal-clear that I was feigning interest in everything that was being taught. I was only 22 at the time, but I was old enough to have learned that it is impossible to excel at something that bores you as much as Torts bored me.

The process of constructing my exit strategy included feeling like a total moron and being paralysed by a generous buffet of fears (ranging from “How do I tell Dad?” to “What the hell am I going to do now?”).

To self-medicate, I bathed in the words of self-help authors (“change is the only constant” came up a lot) and I found ways to touch potential alternative realities. During law school, I was also doing an internship at a digital media investment firm. On the days when I didn’t have class, I got to know older adults who had built interesting, rewarding careers in digital media. This helped me to put my own twenty-something navel-gazing into perspective.

My own transition was different to the transition that you might be considering now. A 22-year-old’s brief stint at law school is hardly comparable to someone at a later

stage of life with an established legal career. Still, my own experience in law school indicates that I understand the appeal of a legal career: security and prestige. Perhaps because I almost became a lawyer myself, the plight of lawyers within the Escape community always resonated with me especially deeply.

While my transition might have been much easier - as I was not leaving behind a steady salary and track record - it still came with meaningful lessons that I often refer to when speaking to Escape members, such as this: we often run away from that which we secretly desire. Looking back, I always wanted an entrepreneurial career, but law school was an incredibly convenient way to distract myself from dreams that my mind told me were simply not possible.

Sometimes we run away from the thing we want the most. The older I get, the more I realise that fear or resistance can be a green light to keep going down a new path, instead of being a stop sign. If something scares us in a way that makes us feel alive and excited, it strikes a chord in us because what is at stake is meaningful.

WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT

When I was making the decision about whether or not to leave law school, there were a number of resources that deeply influenced me, which I found myself recommending to Escape members over the years. My goal with this book was to condense those resources into an easy-to-read companion that could function as a reference for anyone considering leaving the law.

Instead of having to schedule various meetings with lawyers

who have gone on to do other things with their careers, I've taken their experiences and condensed their wisdom here, so that you can move forwards faster with your own decision-making process.

If you've ever questioned how others transitioned away from the legal profession, you'll get specific insights into how and why they did so. If you've ever wondered what those ex-lawyers wish that they had been told before they made the leap, you'll see the key messages that keep emerging.

When we're done, you'll be able to understand whether or not it's time to move away from the law, and how you can structure your escape intelligently. Escaping the City is not about opting out or jumping off the metaphorical cliff without a parachute: it's about strategically mapping your change and knowing that you're not alone during the process.

WHAT WE SHALL COVER

The first chapter looks at the meaning of an impasse, which is often mistaken for a quarter-life crisis. There are six phases of impasse, yet you can only progress through each of them when you accept and increase your self-awareness instead of resisting or running away from what is going on inside you.

We will then trace the hidden barriers that stop a person from switching careers. There are always going to be mental barriers when it comes to any kind of transition. Prescribing actions is not enough. Behavioural change starts with becoming more aware of how your mind sometimes holds you back from what you actually want. We look at the

theories of Martin Seligman, often described as the father of the positive psychology movement.

When finding your way out of impasse, you need to use your mind, heart, *and* gut instinct to make decisions, and this is what we cover in the third chapter. A coach can help you to reconnect with your dormant decision-making instincts, which are often devalued in high-pressure environments like law where the rational mind is encouraged beyond all else.

We then explore how self-sabotage can come in a number of forms: “all or nothing” thinking, looking externally first and turning your career change into a never-ending project as opposed to a reality. We trace the evolution of career construction and how building a career in the 21st century is different from the process that previous generations experienced.

Next, we explore the concept of strategic experimentation. Learning, experimenting, and networking is the best way of opening yourself up to new options. Changing careers happens when you craft experiments, shift connections, and reframe past events into a new story.

We tackled the financial aspect of transition in Chapter 6. There are certainly ways to earn a living from your legal skills that do not necessarily require you to remain in your current role if the hours or demands are too overwhelming.

Lastly, we look at accepting resistance, and explore how a grieving process alongside career change is perfectly normal. We also look at the Kurt Lewin model of change, commonly referred to as Unfreeze, Change, Freeze (or Refreeze). We often feel incredibly unstable during the

‘change’ phase, before we have experienced the ‘refreezing’ stage. This instability is normal.

WHAT WE SHALL AVOID

I will not be telling you what you should do with your life. Only you can know that. Perhaps what you need is what many Escape members have also asked for – a little help in remembering what is already inside you.

Leaving any job is risky. But there are ways to mitigate the risk and this guide is a tool to doing just that. It is designed to help you begin thinking about alternative careers but it is just a beginning.

No guide written by someone you have never met is going to be able to tell you what to do. So do take this book for what it is: a step toward a more fulfilling career. While I can’t give you the answers, I can hopefully help you to find your own answers within yourself.

[1]

GET UNSTUCK

“Talk to a surprising number of people who went to law school, and you’ll hear a remarkably similar story: There is a moment, usually in your second year (and often, precisely when you’re in the middle of an interview, convincing the interviewer - and yourself - just how passionate you are about the intricacies of contract law), that a creeping feeling begins to take hold. All of a sudden, you realize that this pricey, hard, and tedious thing you got yourself into is not at all what you want to do for the rest of your life.”

- Devo Ritter

I asked my friend how she was and she gave a pretty honest reply.

“I feel shit, I look shit, because I don’t *give* a shit about what I’m doing every day,” she sighed. “I’m becoming so *full* of shit that I can’t even gauge when I’m telling the truth anymore.”

Well, join the club, I said to her. This room was full of people who, I guessed by their very presence, felt the same pain as her.

It was a Tuesday evening in London’s Piccadilly Circus and

about 60 lawyers were trickling into a conference room in the Hub Westminster co-working space for an Escape event about leaving the law.

My friend and I stood to one side. She bitched about her day and indirectly reminded me why we had chosen to run this very event.

“I could not be more ready for tonight,” she declared. “Give it to me. Seriously. I need to get out.”

Over the last few months, we’d spent hours talking about what she’d been feeling, which, I’d realised since working with Escape the City, was so normal. In fact, it almost seemed strange if over-worked lawyers *hadn’t* felt what she had been feeling.

As she had explained, it wasn’t depression, but it didn’t feel good either. It was like being in some kind of perpetual hangover or fog except without alcohol involved. When alcohol did get involved, it only seemed to make things worse.

The question lingering in her 3am thoughts: “What is it that I *really* want to do with my life? Why the hell can’t I decide? What is wrong with me for not knowing?”

She felt stuck. Rationally she knew that she was lucky to have her job but emotionally she felt like it was preventing her from doing whatever it was that she was actually meant to be doing.

As she smoothed her black pencil skirt and mustered up a smile for me, I thought about a book that I’d recommended to people in her position countless times, although I had never before mentioned it to her.

I knew that she barely had time to do anything outside of work, let alone read for pleasure - but the book wasn't just some corny self-help tome or clichéd careers guide.

The book - *Getting Unstuck: A Guide to Discovering Your Next Career Path* - was written by business psychologist and researcher Timothy Butler, the director of career development programs at Harvard Business School.

Maybe it had been the link to Harvard that gave me the impetus to trust the book more than I trusted most career guides, but as soon as I had started reading it, I had been hooked.

In heavily paraphrased form, its main message is this: "Feeling like shit sometimes is perfectly normal. Feeling like shit means that better things are on the way, if you're brave enough to accept that you need to make a change."

THE EMERGENCE OF IMPASSE

It is all too easy to float through the motions of life. When we start to take responsibility for our own lives, it becomes more painful to accept that perhaps we are not pitching ourselves in the direction we originally envisioned.

This is where a lot of people fall into what mainstream culture labels 'the quarterlife crisis' - a term that I have grown to violently dislike, as I think it oversimplifies what Butler more accurately labels 'an impasse.'

An impasse, as Butler describes, is when "we try to push our way forward using our old views and methods. Soon we realise this is not working and find ourselves at a dead end.

Energy and inspiration begin to evaporate; our conviction seems less certain.”

“We begin to hear the stinging voice of our inner critic and old doubts about our ability and our direction return. We seem to be both sinking and moving backward,” he says, summing up exactly what I had seen countless Escape members experiencing.

Butler goes on to explain the point that illustrates the crux of his entire book: “These feelings at first may bring alarm, but we must come to recognise them as signals that an important process is beginning. Being at impasse is a developmental necessity.”

To treat these feelings as psychological growing pains seemed to be a much more productive approach. We’re conditioned to run away when things are hard. However, Butler talks about stepping into any pain and seeing it as an important signal that how we make sense of the world is about to change.

SELF-ATTRIBUTION

There is a difference between minor day-to-day annoyances and an impasse. Butler outlines that for most people, an impasse sneaks up unexpectedly and at first presents itself through feelings of frustration, a significant down mood and what may feel like the first flickering signs of depression. Or, as my friend described, ‘feeling like shit.’

What can block us from fully moving through the impasse is the guilt that comes with self-attribution, as in, the suspicion that there is something wrong with *us* for even

feeling this way. This involves thoughts like, “I’m not proceeding correctly, I’m failing, I’m not living up to my potential, I’m not doing my job the way that it should be done, I can’t see ahead and I can’t get motivated.”

This is a feeling shared across the globe. As a former corporate lawyer and current Escape member from New Zealand shared:

“I felt guilty for complaining about a job that, on paper, is a very good job, well respected and offers a good salary. I questioned why I was so unhappy when many others before me (including my Dad) had just ‘sucked it up’ and embraced it as a good solid career without searching for the ‘dream job’. A lot of my friends relate to this, thinking that we are being needy or demanding by questioning what we are doing and wanting to move away from the law. This is just another way we blame ourselves for being at this point.”

Guilt is not a productive emotion. The more productive way through impasse is to focus on self-acceptance as well as acknowledging the liberating fact that you are the only person who can experience, understand, and navigate yourself out of what you are going through.

MILLENNIAL ANXIETY

George Bernard Shaw said, “*Life isn’t about finding yourself, life is about creating yourself.*” Never before has that creation been so complex. The choices that millennials are faced with are more complex and varied than those our parents dealt with.

These days, the integration of our emotional and

psychological states with commercial realities is an ongoing riddle as opposed to a simple process, and the impasse is a necessary phase that we will go through more often and more deeply than our parents did.

There are new stresses involved in constructing the self. We live in an age where our career becomes a key playground through which to derive a sense of identity, fulfillment, and meaning. A job is no longer just a way to pay the bills.

With new freedoms come new anxieties. There is a new existential stress among millennials that comes with having that very ability to choose their own path. In many ways, we are liberated without being empowered: more doors are now open, but we are not necessarily informed about what lies beyond them or what it takes to pass through.

VUCA has become a trendy managerial acronym used to describe or reflect on the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity of general conditions and situations. When applied to the subject of millennial career choices, it explains the proliferation of the ‘quarter life crisis’ and this new stress, which I sense in my most ambitious peers, that comes when you believe that you have the power to create whichever ‘self’ you desire to construct.

The privilege of being able to participate in that construction is a double-edged sword. To believe that you can become whoever you want to be is an incredible gift of confidence. However, if you *can* become whoever you want to be, and you *fail* to become that –then you become the one to blame. You are the faulty architect. So in that new heightened confidence comes a further fall when the opposite may indeed be truer.

In previous generations, identity was largely inherited where these days it is now constructed. Today we are all architects of our own identities, yet we are still learning how to put together career blueprints. This is why the impasse has become increasingly prevalent.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMPASSE

As Butler describes, “A life impasse fulfills a specific purpose in our psychological development. It is a call to return to and integrate aspects of our emotional and psychological being that have been set aside because of competing life circumstances.”

Butler explains that there are six phases of impasse, as described below. These phases are not rigidly linear – there is constant back and forth between the different stages.

1. *SENSING*

The first phase is to sense an impasse. The automatic response, and the one which everyone takes, is to keep on going anyway and pushing through – pulling more hours, trying to shuffle around the current arrangement, trying to figure out how to make the current situation work through adjusting small daily habits.

2. *GETTING STUCK*

The second phase sees the crisis deepening – the small adjustments don’t seem to be working and emotionally there is a sense of being stuck. Old issues emerge and the inner critic flares up and becomes louder than ever.

3. *REALISING*

The third phase is to realise that the entire old way of thinking isn't working. We begin to accept the situation with a more open outlook.

4. *OPENING UP*

The fourth phase pushes us to listen to what we may not have heard before and to open up to new information. We are pushed to new levels of understanding and we are forced to go deeper with exploring why we are stuck.

5. *BECOMING AWARE*

The fifth phase is an increased insight into patterns of the self - awareness of what environments we enjoy, our deepest values, what matters to us. As we grow older we have the possibility of gaining insight into our own patterns and our own deepest interests and whether or not they are expressed through certain roles.

6. *ACTING*

The sixth and final phase is about taking action, without which the benefits of an impasse cannot really be experienced. We take some action that shows that we have been through the impasse, learned what we needed to observe, and can now go out into the world armed with these lessons.

SAM'S STORY: "THE ACCIDENTAL LAWYER"

Sam worked with us at Escape after leaving a legal career, to learn more about content and marketing. As I learned more about his transition, I began to appreciate the eloquence with which he expressed his story. Because the undercurrent of his story matched what I had observed from many other members before him, we will follow Sam's story throughout this guide.

His episode exemplifies the impasse that Butler describes – feeling trapped between what we are doing and what we yearn to do; being stuck between what we had hoped for and what we have been given; remaining glued to what is familiar yet aching to explore the unknown; living in emotional purgatory and wanting to taste excitement again.

The first stage of Sam's story demonstrates what the initial stages of impasse often look like.

* * *

I was a solicitor for a while, though I never really felt like one. I had no affinity with the profession, the role or the work, and as far as I could tell, I was really only a solicitor according to my CV and my LinkedIn profile. Calling myself a solicitor was kind of like calling yourself a guitarist because you happen to have a guitar in your bedroom: the accoutrements don't necessarily reflect the substance.

Such was my almost immediate disillusionment with my corporate role that I spent the huge majority of my time thinking about

what I would do when I left law. My next move was the kind of thing I was passionate about and could get excited about. I couldn't get excited about law.

I had fallen haphazardly into a legal training contract – a result of it being an easy option, the obvious choice following my law degree and a relative financial boon. Doubtless my decision was also in part down to cowardice, and embarrassingly, a preoccupation with maintaining the perception of parity with my peer group. This is the single most ridiculous reason for my choice, but it seems to be a common pressure in terms of career decisions.

I knew after a week that I was in the wrong career, and although I regularly challenged myself to re-commit, re-motivate and reassess how I could get the most from my job, it was useless: I was in the wrong place doing the wrong thing.

I tried working with different people and I tried doing different work. I tried pretending that I cared about the projects I was working on, and I tried a slapdash approach based on a public display of not caring. None of this made the experience any less of a chore. To spend such a huge amount of time persevering with an endless chore dressed up as a corporate treadmill is soul-destroying. I didn't want to be there, and I had no enthusiasm for the work that I was supposed to be doing.

Well, no matter, I thought; decision made, now get on with your life. Just bag a couple of international secondments and get out of there. And that's what I did: I spent six months criss-crossing beaches in Southeast Asia, followed by six months in a Jacuzzi in Moscow. Not a bad stint, certainly. But the fact that I had two such incredible experiences and still maintained such an overriding negative impression demonstrates the extent to which I felt stifled by my job.

For all the beaches and banyas that my sojourns abroad had offered me, I had spent two and a half years doing unstimulating, unfulfilling and seemingly inconsequential work. I had sacrificed an awful lot in terms of evenings, weekends and relationships – essentially my freedom to enjoy life.

Ultimately, I had sacrificed my happiness, and the question I kept asking myself was why?

There are a number of easy answers: stability, security later in life, a means to an end (“put in your time now so as to set yourself up for later on”), and probably the most persistent justification of all – money.

The money was good, of course (although some way from being as good as my peers working in finance). And I happily spent the money (inevitably, you spend what you earn), although I did so frivolously, seeking short-term gratification in order to make up for the drudgery of my normal working life.

Sadly, short-term gratification is inherently illusory. What’s worse is that I found that even this was undermined by a nagging preoccupation with my professional dissatisfaction. It wasn’t that I couldn’t switch off from the work (I can’t claim to have been switched on that much!) but rather that I couldn’t switch off from a sense of neither fulfilling my potential, nor committing to my aspirations.

I couldn’t reconcile the work that I was doing with the notion that I hadn’t spent years of effort jumping through academic hoops to end up with such a dismal sense of apathy regarding my work. It was all so dispiriting.

Ultimately, my problem was show-stoppingly simple and abundantly clear to me: my work negated my happiness. And

to buy into work that has that kind of impact takes some justification.

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While different things can trigger each person's impasse, what each trigger has in common is that it is a wake-up call - as Butler says, an impasse is "a request for us to change our way of thinking about ourselves and our place in the world."

Here are some examples of what triggered others to start considering a career change.

JIM

Co-founder of Blunt Communications, a PR consultancy, and bragitup.com, which curates the web's best deals.

"My wife had recently given birth to our son George when I had an appraisal meeting with a number of partners. There were no problems with the appraisal until one of the partners suggested that I should be writing more legal articles.

At that point I thought that they didn't really know much about me and that the last thing I would want to do, with a young child at home, would be to write an esoteric piece that nobody would read. I had also reached a point where I was working on other businesses, and thought, 'that should be me instructing lawyers!'"

DEANNE

A creative script editor and producer in television and film, with a wide range of skills in all areas of production.

“I had a niggling sense that there was more to life than reading corporate finance documents until 2am. There was also a desire to try and make a go of the only career path that had ever interested me, even if I failed.

Having to go into work on a Saturday with a raging hangover and a bucket of KFC to spend 12 hours reviewing documents that bored me silly was a definite low point. But it was more a growing sense of doom that I had made a terrible mistake with my choice of career and if I didn’t do something soon, I could be trapped there forever.”

ALISON

Operates Chez Serre Chevalier, a boutique UK tour company offering tailor-made holidays.

“Like most solicitors, by four or five years after qualifying you start thinking about the future and, in particular, whether it may be possible to become a partner.

I started thinking about the bigger picture: did I want to live in London for the foreseeable future; was I prepared to continue with the working demands of a city lawyer; and were there other things I would like to achieve?

As I was pondering these issues, my partner’s cousin Jackie, who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and was just two years older than me, very sadly passed away. It was a huge shock to us both. It made us realise that it is all too easy to talk about changing your life, but if we were serious about following our dreams then it was time to take a risk and do something about it.”

THE PATH THROUGH IMPASSE

If you're reading this, it is more than likely that you're at the first, second or third stage of an impasse. However, to move through the impasse, it must first be accepted. Instead of avoiding and fearing it, each of these Escape members built the ability to accept and experience darker times as part of a longer cycle of creativity and change. As Butler explains, "They are able to say, 'This condition, this feeling state is something I am going through, rather than something I am.'"

This guide helps you move through your own impasse by outlining the actions you can take. Action helps you to gather new experiences and new data points for your decision-making process. The alternative is failing to take action and remaining stuck in the same cycle of frustration and despair without any information about new routes or possibilities.

How we move through impasse is explored in the following chapters. We explore how to trace the hidden barriers preventing you from starting to escape, how to assess where you're at and how to map an escape route through experimenting strategically and preparing financially.

An impasse is like your computer's operating system prompting you to update the software. It is a signal that our cognitive map of life and the way we fit into the world is outdated. We all carry ideas about our place in the world yet that cognitive map never completely matches reality, which is forever changing. When our typical approaches fail, it is a sign that we need to alter our entire outlook and treatment of the problem.

That is why, at the event that night in the Hub Westminster, I felt mixed emotions as I told my friend to take her seat. Of course it's not fun to sense melancholy in someone you care about. But part of me was excited for her. I knew that she wasn't having a 'quarter-life crisis' - she was at the first stage of an impasse. And I was curious to see where it would take her.

IN A NUTSHELL

- » An impasse is a completely natural psychological stage: it often looks like a down mood, frustration, or depression, but without going through this growth process, we cannot grow, change, and - eventually - live more fully in a larger world.
- » The career choices that our generation faces are more complex than those of our predecessors and so we are likely to face an impasse more frequently than our parents did.
- » There are six phases of impasse, yet we can only progress through each of them when we accept and increase our self-awareness instead of resisting or running away from what is going on inside us.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- » Butler, Timothy. *Getting Unstuck: A Guide to Discovering Your Next Career Path*. Harvard Business Review, 2009. Print.
- » Hall, Sam. "Is It Worth Being Unhappy in Your

Profession?” *Escape the City*. 26 Mar. 2014. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.escapethecity.org/blog/get-unstuck/worth-unhappy-profession>>

- » Ritter, Devo. “What to Do When You Don’t Want to Be a Lawyer Anymore.” *The Muse*. 21 Mar. 2014. Web. 9 June 2015. <<https://www.themuse.com/advice/life-after-law-what-to-do-when-you-dont-want-to-be-a-lawyer-anymore>>

EXERCISES

- » Read more about Timothy Butler’s approach to impasse in this article:

Lagace, Martha. “Feeling Stuck? Getting Past Impasse.” *Harvard Business School Working Knowledge*. 25 Apr. 2007. Web. 10 Nov. 2014. <<http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/5548.html/>>

- » Do Timothy Butler’s 100 Jobs exercise. As he describes: “It has nothing to do with jobs. It’s a way of helping a person identify the core themes, dynamic tensions, and images that are trying to emerge at this particular moment in his or her life.”
- » You can find a version of the 100 Jobs exercise, adapted from *Getting Unstuck*, here: http://alumni-prod-acquia.gsb.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/The_100_Jobs_Exercise.pdf (Chan, Andy. *The 100 Jobs Exercise*. 2008)

HOW I ESCAPED: BELLA'S STORY

“Once I had got comfortable with the idea that I wasn’t throwing in the towel and giving up, but rather making a conscious decision to better myself and my career then any hesitation about leaving the law faded.”

I left because I had become disillusioned with the law. Lawyers are, in general, very intelligent, driven, motivated people so when you spend years managing document reviews, for example, you start to question what you are doing. You start to question whether there is anything else you could be doing where your skills can be used in a way that is more fulfilling, not only for yourself but where you can actually make a more significant contribution to the lives of others.

Now, I’ve taken up an executive director position at a not-for-profit organisation in Australia. Founded on the concept that a healthy environment, a healthy community and a healthy lifestyle are inextricably linked, the organisation runs and supports a variety of programs that aspire to enrich people’s lives and enable people to improve their mental and physical health through real interactions with nature.

The turning point was when I moved to Belgium to work for a magic circle firm. I initially saw this as my ‘wow, I’ve made it’ moment, but soon realised that once my life was stripped back to just being all about work, a legal career was no longer what I wanted. My physical and mental health were suffering the two years I spent overseas, both

in Belgium and London, and I knew that for that reason alone it was time to rethink my career.

I was fortunate to be approached by an old mentor about taking up my new role. Thankfully, my new role pays a comparable salary to my legal role, so I was able to make the transition with financial ease.

While I perhaps wouldn't have been an immediate first choice for my new employer, they were interested in my legal background as it was taken as a given that I had excellent communication, reasoning and writing skills. The organisation was in a transition phase where it was looking to take a more professional approach so my background was seen as a real positive. They acknowledged that some specific training may be needed around corporate governance and director duties to get me up to speed, and were very open about providing that for me.

When you spend so long at university and training to be a lawyer I think it is only natural that we want to see all that hard work and time pay off. I knew that life was short, but I kept telling myself that my legal career would get better.

After reading "The Escape Manifesto" by Escape the City, my mentality changed. I looked around at those colleagues above me and thought, 'do I really want to end up like them?' The work and long hours just got worse the higher you progressed and I just thought that there had to be more to life than this. Once I paused long enough to acknowledge that then the thought of leaving changed from being daunting to being really exciting.

I like to finish things that I start and to work towards and achieve the goals I set myself. Initially, leaving the

law wasn't part of those goals. However, once I had got comfortable with the idea that I wasn't throwing in the towel and giving up but rather making a conscious decision to better myself and my career, then any hesitation about leaving the law faded.

I've wanted to be a lawyer since I was 15 (I'm now 32). When you spend your whole adult life working towards one goal, and that goal takes up all your time, you find that other passions and interests either don't exist or get pushed aside. The lack of other passions was one of the most confronting things I had to acknowledge once I realised that I wanted to leave the law. My only regrets are that I didn't leave the law earlier.

There was only one month between me resigning and me starting my new role, so I gave 3 weeks' notice and then relocated back to Australia.

Don't let the potential judgment you may receive from others be a reason for not leaving. It's your life! To be fair, you are not the only one thinking of making the move and you will be surprised by the support you receive.

* * *

[2]

TRACE THE HIDDEN BARRIERS

“How strange that the nature of life is change, yet the nature of human beings is to resist change. And how ironic that the difficult times we fear might ruin us are the very ones that can break us open and help us blossom into who we were meant to be.”

- Elizabeth Lesser

About a year after that event at the Hub Westminster, one of the members who had attended appeared at the entrance of Adam Street Club, where we were running an Escape event. I recognised him as his six-foot frame stepped through the doorway although I didn't know him that well.

I remembered that his name was Scott, that he was a lawyer, and that he was a fellow Kiwi. Sure enough, he addressed me as “mate” and then asked, “How's it going?”

I told Scott a little bit about what I'd been working on at Escape. As he was wearing a suit, I assumed that he was still in his old job. I was curious as to what might have changed since I'd last seen him and something in my face must have asked the question before I voiced it.

He grinned at me, and before I could ask what *he* had been up to, he blurted out, “I quit!”

Regardless of what I blurted back (most likely something along the lines of “Wow” or “How?”), he steamrolled along with his story, talking about how he handed in his resignation, then went back home to New Zealand for a couple of weddings, and now, he explained, “I’m back here, in a new job. *Not* as a lawyer.”

Scott smiled proudly. In his voice, I heard the same pride of a new father showing off a wallet photo of his smiling baby. Except in this case, he had created a new career, which I guess warranted just as much of a celebration.

I wasn’t sure what was physically appropriate, as it seemed too strange to hug him, even though I really wanted to. Instead I did some weird shoulder-punch gesture and congratulated him.

SCOTT’S STORY: “USE FEAR TO GALVANISE YOU”

I had reached a point in my legal career where I was acutely aware that in order to progress I would have to fully commit both to law as a career and to my firm (or find a role elsewhere). It therefore seemed like an opportune time to ask myself some hard questions: “Am I passionate about law as a career? Is this what I want to do for the rest of my working life? If I walk away from law what else is out there and will I have any transferrable skills?”

The answer to the first and second questions was “No”. As soon as I knew that it was clear to me that I had to go.

Everyone has difficult times in their legal career (or any career), but in the six months prior to making the decision I increasingly felt that, despite spending the significant majority of my waking hours behind a desk poring through thousands of documents, painstakingly piecing together the background to complex disputes and drafting lengthy witness statements to support the client's position, the work I was doing wasn't appreciated.

Rather, it was simply expected and demanded. I know law is a service industry and the remuneration is generally considered to be very good (unless you break it down into an hourly wage), but there is nothing worse than being grilled by a client for something trivial after having worked all weekend to meet their deadline. That, combined with the sense of dread I felt creeping in every Sunday about the impending work week, helped me realise that I had to make some radical changes.

Having realised it was time to go, the next question was, when? As it happened, I had a family event in New Zealand that I wanted to make the effort to attend (despite being on the other side of the world). I had no annual leave left, so in order to make this happen, I had to quit. This actually made things easier, as it felt like there was no alternative. I knew that money would become an issue very quickly, so I started saving as much as I could to finance the transition. The risk of running out of money would cloud any decision-making process so it was important to remove that from the decision.

My biggest concern about leaving was whether I would find work outside of the law. Were my skills transferrable and, if not, would I have to start again? I spent the next two months talking to people within the business community, my peers in the legal industry and pretty much anyone who would listen about what lay beyond the law. I read a lot of the material online

at escapethecity.org and went to a number of their seminars, including one on “Leaving the Law”.

The seminar was excellent as it made me realise that I wasn't crazy and that there are a lot of other lawyers out there who have reached the same or similar conclusions about their careers. It became clear to me from my discussions that many of the skills I had learnt in the law could be utilised in a career in project management. In order to test this I sat my Project Management qualification (PRINCE2) over the course of two weekends. My results were good so I handed in my resignation.

I didn't attempt to get a job before I quit because I couldn't focus on anything other than law. I knew there was a considerable risk that I would be out of work for some time but I decided that this risk could be harnessed, as it would galvanise me into action rather than act as a noose around my neck.

The general attitude of friends and family to my resignation and decision to leave law was very supportive once I explained my reasons. Many of my lawyer friends are heading down the same path so they were naturally very supportive and curious to see how I fared outside the law.

After I quit I did some consultancy work for my old law firm on an interesting case for three weeks then I returned to New Zealand for a month. During this time I interviewed for a potential project management role which had come up through a personal contact that was aware that I had just stepped away from the law. I was very fortunate to land that role and I've been working as an interim Project Manager in a logistics company for the past nine months.

My role gives me direct contact with a large number of business units and employees within the company. I work directly for the

CFO and CEO and this has given me invaluable insight into the management and daily running of a large multinational company.

My background as a lawyer has proven very useful so far. The discipline, critical thinking, analysis, stakeholder management and time management skills have stood me in good stead. All of these are essential for effective project management.

Looking back, the hardest thing was handing in my resignation. It felt at the time that I was going to step off a cliff into a career free-fall. I realise now that this was irrational (though entirely understandable). There will never be a right time to quit or make a change. In terms of advice for anyone contemplating leaving the law, I would say that as soon as you know that you want out, start planning and set yourself a hard stop date to resign.

If it helps, put a physical event in place immediately after the resignation date so you are working towards something. Don't worry if you haven't figured out what you are going to do or if you haven't landed that next role before you resign. After you get the weight of resignation off your shoulders you will find it is much easier to make decisions about the future.

Back yourself. Do your research, make a plan and then push the button. Use the fear to galvanise you into action.

* * *

MENTAL BARRIERS

On the way home after seeing him at the event, I had my earphones on and that 'Home' song by Phillip Phillips trickled onto my Spotify: "Settle down, it'll all be clear..."

I thought about all the other lawyers who had come to that Hub Westminster event, some of whom I'd kept in touch with. Half of them had left or were in the process of leaving or making plans to leave; half seemed to be remaining right where they were.

As my close friend who had 'felt like shit' had pointed out, while it had been nice to hear various stories from lawyers who had left, she had found it hard to figure out how their stories could be applied to her own situation.

I thought about the other Escape members I knew who had been at the same event but had left with a completely different outlook. They had already made up their minds to leave and the event had only confirmed to them that they were on the right path.

Others were maybe never going to leave law and the event had just been a reminder that somewhere out there was other people living fulfilling careers.

The song kept playing: "Don't pay no mind to the demons / They fill you with fear / The trouble it might drag you down / If you get lost, you can always be found..." I thought about how all lawyers face the barriers that were outlined in the introduction, and the limitations of what any book, event, or external force could give a person.

* * *

As we previously explored, these seem to be the main barriers facing most lawyers wanting to leave the profession:

- "You don't focus on the bigger picture, just accomplishing each stage."

- “The biggest obstacle is probably financial uncertainty.”
- “I wouldn’t want to leave without a definite plan.”
- “When you’ve invested a lot of time and energy, it becomes hard to change direction.”

If we look at those barriers objectively, it seems obvious that all a person would need to do to overcome those barriers would be:

- Carving out time and space to zoom out on the bigger picture;
- Decreasing financial uncertainty;
- Discovering what to do next;
- Changing direction even after investing a lot of time and energy.

Obviously those aren’t simple tasks that can be completed overnight. However, Scott managed to do all of those things, as did many other Escape members. What I learned from watching them over the years is that if our minds don’t *want* us to take certain actions, we’re not going to take them.

When it comes to transition, prescribing actions alone isn’t that helpful, because they don’t always address the root barriers - which are often psychological.

If you’re not aware of how your mind can be getting in the way of your happiness, your mind can start controlling your actions, even when those actions bring you further away from happiness.

Rob Archer, a career psychologist that we often partner

with at Escape the City, often talks about how our mind is not our friend. We assume that our minds want what is best for us. However, as a trained lawyer, your mindset can often be primed to *prevent* happiness.

WHAT IS REALLY STOPPING YOU?

Dr Martin Seligman, Ph.D. is the Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the former President of the American Psychological Association.

Among his 20 books, one is called *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. Within that is a chapter entitled, “Why Are Lawyers So Unhappy?”

He argues that while lawyers overtake doctors as the highest-paid professionals, they are also in poor mental health, at much greater risk than the general population of depression.

In a study completed at Johns Hopkins University, lawyers came out on top for statistically significant elevations of major depressive disorder, suffering from depression at a rate of 3.6 times higher than employed persons generally. Compared to non-lawyers, they also experience much higher rates of alcoholism and illegal drug use.

Seligman concludes: “Lawyers embody the paradox of money losing its hold. They are the best-paid professionals, and yet they are disproportionately unhappy and unhealthy. And lawyers know it; many are retiring early or leaving the profession altogether.”

He explains that there are two main causes for this psychological disposition among lawyers.

PESSIMISM

Firstly, lawyers have a pessimistic explanatory style, meaning that the causes of negative events tend to be seen as persistent, uncontrollable and pervasive (“It’s going to last forever, and it’s going to undermine everything.”). An optimist, on the other hand, may see negative events as local, temporary and changeable.

While pessimistic thinking is unhelpful in most areas of life, pessimists do better at law. One study referenced in Seligman’s book followed students of the Virginia Law School throughout their three years of study. Contrary to the results of previous studies looking at other areas of life, the pessimistic law students on average outperformed more optimistic students on traditional measures of achievement, such as grade point averages.

Pessimism is seen as a positive trait among lawyers, since perceiving troubles as pervasive and permanent is part of what constitutes prudence. Prudence helps a lawyer to spot every possible problem that might arise in any transaction. This ability *helps* the practicing lawyer who, by spotting what the non-lawyer might not see, can help his clients defend against far-fetched possibilities. Even if you don’t have such prudence at the start, law school will strive to ingrain it within you. Yet while this trait might make you a good lawyer, it does not always make you a happy human being.

LOW DECISION LATITUDE

Another psychological factor that demoralises lawyers,

especially junior ones, is the limited choices one believes that one has (also known as low decision latitude) in high-stress situations. Seligman also writes about a study that examined the link between job conditions and depression and coronary disease. One combination stood out as harmful to health and morale: high job demands coupled with low decision latitude. Individuals with these jobs have much higher rates of coronary disease and depression.

It is inevitable that lawyers working in big firms (particularly as trainees or newly qualified lawyers) have low decision latitude by virtue of the very structure of those firms. Clear hierarchies that exist from the partner level down to the trainee level mean that it can be hard for junior lawyers to take control of their own work flow and responsibilities, not to mention the hours that they are in the office.

This structure, combined with often unrealistic client demands can mean that junior lawyers have very little opportunity to shape what their stressful working lives actually look like day to day. It is also common for junior lawyers to find themselves faced with issues that need immediate resolution, yet without the control over the situation to do just that. For example, at this level of the hierarchy, junior lawyers often lack the licence to take unsupervised actions or they lack the authority with clients to be able to progress matters themselves.

The stress, doubt and uncertainty that a junior lawyer feels in this situation is only amplified by the firm's culture - where job demands are high, and where absolute perfectionism is mandatory. It is not hard to see how weeks and months and years of experiencing such low decision latitude must take its toll on a lawyer's morale.

PESSIMISM IN ACTION

We've seen how lawyers' tendency towards pessimism, combined with the demoralisation that follows low decision latitude, are two barriers which can affect the decision to move out of law and toward a more fulfilling career.

However, the real-life impact of these factors, and particularly the tendency towards pessimism, really hit home when I found myself explaining these concepts to a lawyer friend who had been going through her own career transition.

She described the multiple decision making stages she went through when deciding to leave the law and how, at every stage (i.e., deciding to resign, looking for new opportunities and progressing job applications), her tendency towards pessimistic, or risk averse thoughts, would emerge and in some way hold her back.

After years working at a big corporate law firm, where she was required to examine and highlight risks every single day, she explained that it was easy to fall into the default pattern of questioning each decision.

However, it wasn't until she voiced these doubts to her boyfriend, a committed optimist, that she realised just how damaging those niggling pessimistic voices had been. His contrasting perspective was the wake up call to, first, identify just how damaging that learned pessimism was and, second, counteract it by incorporating his more positive comebacks into her decision-making processes.

She gave me a few (highly paraphrased) examples of how this worked when she first considered resignation - when her inner pessimist would clash with his inner optimist.

PESSIMIST: My boss will be disappointed in me.

OPTIMIST: You have to do what is right for you, not your boss, and definitely not the big law firm.

PESSIMIST: I can't leave now; it is a busy time for my team.

OPTIMIST: The team and the firm will survive - it is a big place and you're replaceable.

PESSIMIST: I don't have a good explanation for why I'm leaving and I'm embarrassed about that - I really should know what I'm doing.

OPTIMIST: Fake it until you make it. When people ask what you're doing next, say you have exciting opportunities ahead and you're excited to see where they lead. Own it and don't show doubt (even if you have some).

PESSIMIST: I won't survive without an income and I won't get hired.

OPTIMIST: You are in the top few percent of educated intelligent people in the world - you have a lot to offer people and you will never be begging on the street. You have lots of marketable skills.

PESSIMIST: Maybe I should just suck it up and keep working - it is a safe option and, really, is it that bad?

OPTIMIST: There are so many exciting opportunities in the world - it's a crime to stay in a job where you feel unfulfilled. Just give it a try!

PESSIMIST: What will my friends and family say - they will be so surprised (and potentially disappointed) that I'm

looking at something so different to law after working so hard towards a legal career.

OPTIMIST: Who cares what people say and think - you live your life, not them. The ones that love you will support you no matter what you do, especially when they see how happy you are.

PESSIMIST: What if I don't have any other skills outside the very narrow field I worked in?

OPTIMIST: You're a fast learner and you didn't get through a law degree and years of toiling away in a firm without being an organised and intelligent person who could slot into a new position easily.

PESSIMIST: I won't put myself forward for that position because I'm not sure if it is quite right.

OPTIMIST: What is the harm in applying? There is nothing to lose and you will gain experience in writing your cover letter and preparing your CV. You might make some good connections along the way too. Applying for a job isn't the same as committing to it.

PESSIMIST: It is too embarrassing emailing that person asking for their advice on how they got to their position. In any case, I'm sure they don't have time to respond.

OPTIMIST: People love talking about their jobs and they love talking to people who are interested in their role or industry and eager to learn. You will learn a lot from putting yourself out there.

PESSIMIST: I couldn't volunteer my services because I don't have any more hours in the day.

OPTIMIST: Busy people get stuff done. If you're really interested in finding out what that job is like, you have to give it a try and prioritise that experiment.

It is important to acknowledge the influence of pessimism on a lawyer's mindset and to counteract it wherever possible during a time of transition. As we have already explored, the simple acknowledgment of these barriers is a crucial step in your escape.

CREATING SPACE FOR THE UNKNOWN

Before embarking upon any kind of change, you almost need to prime your mind to allow that change to happen. Otherwise it becomes easy to just use 'money' as an excuse ("I'd love to pursue my passions, but I can't afford to"), as short-term financial insecurity so often can be a legitimate blocker.

We do need money to live and we often can't just walk away from our jobs without some kind of long-term financial game plan.

However, creating that financial game plan is a whole exercise in itself and we have an entire chapter dedicated to that later on. For now, I wanted to emphasise the importance of creating space for the unknown and acknowledging that a lawyer's mind is primed to spot risks and to highlight what can go wrong, instead of what can go right.

In Scott's case, he reached a point where he had to resign. Yes, he had fears, because there were risks involved. But he took the necessary steps to mitigate those risks before making the leap - he saved for the transition, he spoke to

peers in the industry he was looking to enter into, and he believed that with his legal experience he would be able to find a suitable new role for himself.

This demonstrates that some fears are justified and others are irrational – yes, we *should* be scared to cross the road when there are oncoming vehicles; we *should* be scared to step beyond the metal barriers of tall buildings and cliffs. Yes, we should be *scared* of losing our primary source of income, which puts a roof over our head and food on the table. But there is no need to believe that being a lawyer is the one and only method of earning an income.

Allowing yourself to even wander off the path is only going to happen when you recognise what staying on the present path is costing you.

Sam, whose story we were introduced to in the last chapter, realised what remaining a lawyer was costing him – and his story below demonstrates that when you believe you deserve a job that makes you happy, you start to open up to the possibility that you can find it.

SAM'S STORY CONTINUED: “IS IT WORTH IT?”

A huge number of my colleagues were disillusioned with their work, the firm, and everything else that went with it. A commonly heard argument in favour of sticking it out was that it would, eventually, be worth it. The general sentiment was to do your time and make your sacrifices at this stage, so as to create the life that you want for yourself in a few years' time (the actual number of years is hugely ambiguous). I understand the logic.

I'm not naïve, and I'm not looking for a bed of roses. So I asked myself the question: is it worth being unhappy in my profession?

Yes. Utterly and absolutely yes. But only, only, only if you're talking short-term unhappiness for the sake of a worthwhile and attainable (this is crucial) goal. If I have to sacrifice two years (I know, this could be much longer – I just baulk at two!) working 18-hour days and at the end of it I get a job that I love and a salary that gives me the freedom to enjoy my life, then it would be irresponsibly short-termist of me to turn it down.

Sadly, with law, there was no role further down the line, or further up the ladder, that had any hope of getting me excited or enthusiastic about pursuing. There was nothing I could aspire to that would make me happy. I didn't look at my seniors and wish I had their job. I did occasionally look at some of them and wish that they would act with a bit more human decency, but never did I want to swap places with any of them.

A lack of passion for one's job does not necessarily correlate to one's honesty to accept this, and understandably so. It's difficult to admit to yourself and to other people that you're dissatisfied with your professional choices. Our natural inclination is not to really and truly criticise the substance of our professional life, as to do so would be indicative of unhappiness with our own decisions, and ultimately disillusionment with what we are doing.

So it's easier to avoid admitting or accepting and to pretend (at least outwardly) that everything is fine. This leads to us saying things like "well, a job is a job" and "all jobs have their downsides" or, the one that I hate the most, "oh well, I can't complain" – what kind of a lack of aspiration does that show?!

The difficulty is that for so many people (myself included) other

people's perceptions of us are really important to us and we seek comfort in their approval. I always envy people who are entirely devoid of this concern.

This is why we are more likely to donate to charity when we think someone is watching. This is why we de-tag photographs on Facebook and curate our online identity with such rigour. This is why Instagram and Pinterest work – we feel validated by meeting, and ideally surpassing, others' perceptions of us.

So just as we curate our Facebook profile and tweet strategically, we also curate our professional experiences, telling people what we'd like them to think, rather than what is actually the case. And the desire to curate is evident in the stuttered, non-committal response of people who find the question about what they actually do at work difficult. Those who love their jobs and value their work always respond easily, with passion and cogency.

And that's what I'm looking for – something that I can be enthusiastic about, something that I'm proud to talk to people about, something that I believe in.

The most impressive professional that I know left a very successful career at a luxury goods company and took a drop in both seniority and salary so he could work at a start-up whose product he was passionate about. I didn't understand his reasoning at the time, but the fluency with which he talks about his work and his passion for his job tells its own story. When your work is joyful, everything else becomes so much more enjoyable.

* * *

IN A NUTSHELL

- » There are always going to be mental barriers when it comes to any kind of transition. Prescribing actions isn't enough. Behavioural change starts with becoming more aware of how our minds sometimes hold us back from what we actually want.
- » The father of the positive psychology movement, Dr Martin Seligman, talks about how the mindset of a lawyer can be fertile ground for depression because of the pessimistic explanatory style. This means that the causes of negative events tend to be seen as persistent, uncontrollable and pervasive, as well as low decision latitude (the limited choices one believes that one has).
- » Allowing yourself to even wander off the path is only going to happen when you recognise what staying on the present path is costing you. When you believe you deserve a job that makes you happy, you start to open up to the possibility that you can find it.

FURTHER RESOURCES

- » Seligman, Martin. *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment*. Simon & Schuster Australia, 2002. Print.
- » Pryor, Lisa. *The Pin Striped Prison*. Picador Australia, 2008. Print.
- » Worker Bee Free - A blog for workerbees who want to break free. Meagher, Michelle. *Worker Bee Free*. 24

Dec. 2013. Web. 20 Dec. 2014. <<https://workerbeefree.wordpress.com/about/>>

EXERCISES

- » What is the biggest mental barrier that you are facing when you think about leaving the law?
- » If your best friend, who was a lawyer, came to you and confessed that they really wanted to leave the law but was facing the same mental barrier you described above - what advice would you give them? How would you help them to overcome that mental barrier?