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Message From the Chair

By Ramit Mizrahi

I turned forty last month. And in the months leading up to it, I began to reflect on who I was, who I wanted to be, and the things that bring me meaning and contentment. (I think my January column evidences these sentiments.)

One of my best friends also turned forty a couple of months ago. She was nonchalant and serene about the milestone. In her mind, fifty is the big milestone—the one where hopefully you have realized your potential and have achieved many of your big goals, but where you still have much to look forward to. Indeed, for most people, happiness tends to be higher earlier and later in life. Researchers found that for women, life happiness hits a low around the age of forty and then begins rise after that (for men, life happiness hits a low around fifty and then rises again).¹ So, hopefully, the best is yet to come!

Anyhow, my reflections led me to a number of conclusions, both personal and professional:

1. Work will take up as much of your time as you let it.

There are an infinite number of demands on our time. Most of us feel passionate about our work and, given how high the stakes are for our clients, want to do the absolute best job that we can every time. There is always more that we can do to advance our work. In addition to representing our clients, many of us also juggle law practice

management, business development, mentoring, and volunteer work.

I love the work I do and am grateful for the opportunity to do it. But I believe that I often let the pendulum swing too far in favor of work. (Who hasn't delayed a much needed visit to the doctor or dentist? Realized that they hadn't called a dear friend or loved one in some time because they've been so busy? Skipped out on a kid's event or, worse yet, been there without actually being *present*? At some point, it adds up to too much.)

I have been working to guard my personal time a little more carefully. As the saying goes, "No' is a complete sentence." I recognize that there will be times when, by design, work will be all-consuming (for example, when in trial), but the default should swing toward a more balanced life.

2. A division between work and personal time is essential.

Here is where I, like so many others, have failed. Between my home computer, work computer, travel laptop, iPhone, and iPad, I'm looking at a screen more hours of the day than I'd care to admit. On the one hand, it's incredibly convenient to be able to work from anywhere (and I

get more done in my home office in the first two hours of the day than I do during the remaining hours of the day). On the other hand, it's far too easy to check work email during a lull or to plant myself back at my desk and work in the evenings. I have written before about how important the divide between work and personal time is—and I am inevitably happier when I maintain it—but it is still mostly aspirational for me at this time.

3. Focus on the more rewarding aspects of practice.

Added to the list of things most of us never learned in law school: that the day-to-day practice of an attorney varies wildly depending on practice area and type of employer; and you should figure out not just the substantive area of law that interests you, but what your strengths are and whether your chosen practice will play to them. For example, analytical, intellectual types may favor appellate law; those who enjoy storytelling may prefer to be trial lawyers; those who like working closely with individuals may choose to work for a legal services nonprofit, etc. While I see myself as fairly well-rounded, I have learned that I prefer some aspects of the job more than others. For

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example, after nearly 15 years of practice, I am happy to be able to delegate most aspects of written discovery. Now that I have both an associate and a paralegal on my team, I can delegate more. It has been a game-changer because it lets me focus on the areas of practice that I enjoy most.

4. **It's important to be a peacemaker.**

Much as I am always itching to take cases to trial, resolution is almost always the better option for all sides. Far too many lawyers mistakenly think that if they make settlement overtures, it will be seen as a sign of weakness. To the contrary, the best lawyers have the confidence to discuss resolution, knowing that they will draw the line as necessary and will not hesitate to try the case if a fair resolution cannot be obtained.² We know the peace that resolution brings our clients—even if they do not know it yet.³ A mediator once told me that he felt that he was doing “God’s work” by settling contentious cases. I think we can all agree with the concept, whether we

take his words literally or figuratively. I believe that being peacemakers is one of the highest callings of our profession, and one that we can all aspire to achieve, regardless of the type of labor and employment lawyers we may be.

5. **Each of us can do something to make this world a better place.**

As I wrote about in January, there are so many little things that we can all do to make the day brighter for someone. We need no special skills or resources. We can offer kind words to a loved one or coworker. We can provide a compassionate response to someone who is going through a challenging time. We can mentor the next generation. We can support a friend or coworker’s fundraising efforts—even small contributions add up. We can gather some basic toiletries into a kit and help give a little dignity to a homeless person we see on our drive to work. As the saying goes, “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

We are all works in progress, and this milestone of mine made me acutely aware that I should be spending more of my time doing the things that I find meaningful. It means making the time at work count by ensuring that work is both enjoyable (process) and impactful (result). And it means making the time at home count by spending it with the people that I love and doing the things that I love. And with that, I sign off here and shut my computer down for the night!

ENDNOTES

1. https://warwick.ac.uk/newsandevents/pressreleases/researchers_find_that/
2. It reminds me of the Al Capone quotation: “Don’t mistake my kindness for weakness. I am kind to everyone, but when someone is unkind to me, weak is not what you are going to remember about me.” See https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/3412336.Al_Capone.
3. I can relate to the expression attributed to the Buddha: “Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.” We should not let anger drive our decisions or those of our clients. See https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/buddha_104025.

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