

DRI for Life

The Six-Minute Effect: Lifestyle Design While Billing Time—Part I: “Busy” Is a Four-Letter Word

By Jodi S. Green

Of the many, many excuses people use to rationalize why they can't do something, the excuse “I am too busy” is not only the most inauthentic, it is also the laziest. I think that busy is a decision. We do the things we want to do, period. . . . If we use busy as an excuse for not doing something, what we are really, really saying is that it's not a priority. Simply put: you don't find the time to do something; you make the time to do things.

—Debbie Millman, author and host of the podcast *Design Matters*

I am a recovering workaholic. I use the word “recovering” loosely, anticipating the eye-rolls of friends and colleagues. The irony being that I began penning this column about “balance” from Costa Rica on my first vacation since 2014 and completed it in a dimly lit office long after others went home. It's not that my firm won't allow a vacation. To their credit, I've been sternly lectured about taking time off. Rather, it's the recurring voice in my head that distorts reality with irrational fears: “if I take a vacation, I might not make my hours,” and “my firm (or clients) won't think I'm committed enough,” which becomes “I'll lose respect, status, or business,” and steamrolls into “I'll never succeed as a lawyer and waste my law school investment, a debt that I'm still paying off.”

To be sure, the concept of “work-life balance” is nothing new. Yet our profession makes it easy to endorse the notion that “balance” should be uttered only in hushed tones—like a dirty word unsuited for professional spheres. I would suggest that the first step to finding balance is deceptively simple, really. *The first step*

to finding a modicum of balance in life is slowing down enough to realize that “busy” is a choice.

It's so easy to get caught up in the role we were taught to play in law school: that of the begrudgingly overworked lawyer in a “never-say-no” culture. This notion conjures memories of a senior lawyer's tired remark when I announced my decision to attend law school: “there are lots of easier ways to make money.” I did not heed his advice, accepting my workaholic fate in pursuit of a presumed higher calling. Trapped in the robotic day-to-day grind, I dismissed the advice of seasoned attorneys who cautioned me with words like “burnout” and “balance.” In law school and in life, I'd been conditioned to say “yes,” assuming that my value was contingent on output, disbelieving anyone who said otherwise.

For the record, I do not regret my decision to attend law school. My only regret is sacrificing eight years to the “game” of “Lawyerlife,” which I envisioned as a one-size-fits-all lifestyle. To win the game of Lawyerlife, my younger self believed, one must churn billable hours from (at least)

sunrise to sunset and avoid any semblance of a social life. I should have heeded the warning from the film/novel *The Shining*: “all work and no play makes [Jodi] a dull [girl].” Hindsight is indeed 20/20.

Unfortunately, this unsustainable notion of Lawyerlife continues to thrive. Lawyers are often portrayed as one of two caricatures, the first begetting the second: (1) the 2,400-annual-billable-hour sort who doesn't flinch at sleeping in the office; or (2) the burned-out formerly frantic workaholic who has escaped the shackles of the billable hour to own a bar, yoga retreat, deep-sea diving company [fill-in-the-blank “fun” job] in Brazil or some other place where the dollar carries more weight. Between these extremes, you would be hard-pressed to find many examples of the balanced lawyer who has it all, although I know a few of these mythical creatures. How rare is it to hear a lawyer disclose: I plan to work the minimum billable hours so I can spend time with my family and friends? I hate to admit my discomfort just saying it out loud.

Like others, I am guilty of perpetuating the “overworked and beleaguered” lawyer stereotype by proudly wearing that plight like a badge of honor. Is it any wonder, then, that lawyers recently won top honors for having the “Unhappiest Job” in America? See Jacquelyn Smith, *The Happiest and Unhappiest Jobs in America*, *Forbes* (Mar. 22, 2013). In 2015, the *Chicago Tribune* reported that “lawyers are miserable.” Stephen Carter, *Commentary: Why Lawyers Are Miserable*, *Chicago Tribune* (Sept. 7, 2015).

DRI for Life, continued on page 9



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Despite the morass of articles chronicling our low morale, few, if any, offer a cure for the disease. Furthermore, although the profession no longer tops the list of unhappiest jobs in America, “lawyer” has never been regarded as a happy career. The idea itself seems almost laughable, rebellious. But the rebel in me says it’s time to throw down the gauntlet and make a change. It’s at least time to ask ourselves a difficult question: What’s stopping lawyers from leading happy and balanced lives?

The answer, I would submit, is buried somewhere in our inner monologue. The idea that we are “too busy” to take time for ourselves—like a Costa Rican adventure, family trip to Disney, fly-fishing in

Idaho, or even a quiet afternoon curled up with a book for pleasure—is a myth. It is a fiction. That false narrative starts with a four-year vacation hiatus and ends up permeating our daily existence. Before we know it, we are skipping lunch in fear of missing a call, staying late to bill more hours in lieu of a workout, cancelling a family dinner, missing kids’ birthdays and holiday celebrations, and so on: rinse, repeat, until 10 or 20 years later we end up owning a bar in Brazil and looking back wondering what we did with our lives. Hard stop. Breathe. Take a moment, or even six minutes.

It’s time to rewind and rewrite the narrative. I posit that “busy”—not “balance”—is a four-letter word. Let’s remove

it from our lexicon. That Lawyerlife can be a happy life should not be a revolutionary hypothesis. The first step is admitting that “too busy” is a fiction. We can stop playing the curmudgeonly overworked lawyer as soon as we’re ready to shed that persona. Lawyers can have a life while billing time. More importantly, the lawyers who do should shout it from rooftops. If we start reciting that mantra, maybe the profession will ascend the charts to a happier status.

In the next installment of the “Six-Minute Effect,” I’ll identify strategies to begin rewriting the narrative of Lawyerlife. 