

Rejecting Labels: Being an Attorney is not Your Sole Identity

BY JAKE WISKERCHEN

My family has been in this state a long time – six generations on my mom’s side, in fact. Having roots that deep has afforded me a lot of cool privileges, among which I count the myriad people in the legal field I have met, worked with, and to whom I am related.

Regardless of how we know one another, I invite you to embrace two truths: 1) that I respect your profession deeply, and 2) the last thing I want to do is come off as some outsider who talks past the audience. Or worse, condescends.

That said, I think I know what you do for a living, and it’s really, *really* challenging. Whether you work in civil or criminal, public or private, family law or personal injury, healthcare or immigration, gaming or tech, defense or prosecution, from the bench or aspiring

to it, in front of the dais or behind it, your job demands a lot.

But is it a job ... or an identity?

Being vs. Doing

I don’t think what we *do* for a living should define who we *are* as humans. Some people will say, “Jake is a therapist,” and likewise you probably introduce yourself to strangers by saying something similar, only you replace “therapist” with “attorney” or “lawyer.” And, like me, you probably get similar



sideways glances and/or adoration, depending on the crowd. However, “therapist” is not my identity. In fact, I am trying to work myself out of my job.

I regularly say – and at almost every opportunity – that if mental illness ceased to exist and I still had years remaining on my building lease, I would happily convert the space into a brewpub and coffee shop. If I can teach my patients, and by extension the community at large, to handle their own problems in their own kitchens, living rooms, and workspaces so that they stop coming through my door, I will happily do other work to pay my bills.

So, I reject labels. Labels are limiting. And if you believe, like I do, that human beings are divine creatures with limitless capacity, then I invite you to cease saying limiting things like, “I am an attorney,” because you are so much more than that. Change your language; soften it. Try something like, “I work in the legal field,” or “I’m an attorney *by trade*, and I also ...” with the ellipsis completed with something like, “play adult league hardball, coach my kids, make homebrewed beer, serve at my church, host podcasts, mentor younger professionals, and love my wife.” Notice the language is verb-first, rather than identity centered.

By the way, those all happen to be true statements about me regarding things I do beyond work. I guarantee that you have similar endeavors in your own life. What do you do besides law? Moreover, what are you *capable* of doing? Recognizing one’s potential can be frightening because it is truly limitless.

Emotional (non)functioning

Articles aplenty have been written about burnout, depression, and moral injury (the three are decidedly not the same) along with various forms of self-help and self-care. These pieces often center on what to do in a time of need, but which are almost never about how to avoid sliding into that state in the first place. In other words, they are reactionary, not preventative.

Besides, precious little time is left to do such self-care anyway after pulling a 10-, 12-, or 16-hour day and fighting traffic on the way home. The kids might be wearing out your spouse, or your hobbies haven’t gotten attention for ages

(and in your mind never will), or you’ve missed dinner, or you still have something to write that’s due tomorrow. Or all of the above. And it never seems to end. Thank God for whiskey.

Wait. Am I allowed to write that?

But it’s real, isn’t it? If it’s not a booze bottle, it’s a pill bottle. Or a cigarette. Or if you’re a millennial, a non-combustible nicotine option. Or it’s yelling. Or grumpiness. Or Amazon shopping for crap you don’t need. Or vociferously defending your unhealthy routine because “it’s *who I am* and it *pays the bills, darn it!*” Or it’s a different type of avoidance and withdrawal I didn’t list, like skipping the gym, or skipping sex.

The simple, dirty, unspoken fact is that we use those unhealthy outlets because they work. Or at least, for a little while. But it is *only* a little while because eventually it wears off. Sobriety returns. Anger diminishes. Grumpiness fades. All emotional experiences are temporary. The only time they last longer than necessary is when we don’t truly embrace them, in which case they stack up, both psychologically and physiologically as well.

One solution to permanent wellness is emotional understanding and nonattachment. Our brains are powerful organs that communicate important information to us about the external environment. But if we never learn the function of our emotions and we simply use avoidance (because it works), then we won’t really deal with life and we won’t really move on from it. We will deteriorate, and rot from the inside out. Practice impairment is a real thing. Divorce is a real thing. Suicide is a real thing.

Thanksgiving is a verb

Gratitude is another solution. Or, at least, understanding and practicing it is. I didn’t always possess this skill – and it is definitely a skill that needs repetition – but over several years I have worked on it such that nowadays negativity is jarring to me. Cynicism used to be my home, predictable

and familiar. Miserable, sure, but it was so much easier because it was what I knew best. Now appreciation is familiar and predictable, and it produces far better fruit than my pessimism.

Usually about this time people ask, “How?” and the answer is shockingly easy. Look around you right now and notice one thing for which you are grateful. It could even be this article you’re reading. It could be your healthy eyesight. I wear contacts, but my eyes are healthy, so yes that counts. You’re breathing. If you’re reading this, you likely have membership in a professional organization, to which you pay dues, which means you have money. Those are all things for which gratitude can be expressed. No, I am not being glib, and yes, I am serious.

Being grateful for the little things

mentally pivots one’s attitude away from entitlement and toward humility. It reshifts your perspective. When we have a sense of entitlement, our narrative becomes “I need, I deserve.” Then when we don’t get those things that we think we need and deserve, we end up throwing a fit.

Why? Because we have rehearsed avoidance for so long that we cannot endure distress.

That hinges on emotional functioning, tolerance, and nonattachment. You are not your possessions. You are not your thoughts. You are not your emotions. You are greater, deeper, and more valuable, and humility is required to let go and realize that depth and value.

Now, humility is not to be confused with being stepped on or taken advantage of. Being humble simply means knowing that you don’t know it all and being open to new information. Anyone who studies development of any kind will state with confidence that growth only occurs in disequilibrium. If we are not humble enough to move out of our comfort zones (in my former case, negativity) and into something uncomfortable, we simply will not grow. I have yet to meet anyone who believes he or she is done growing, but many of those same people are

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CONTINUED ON PAGE 15

Rejecting Labels

unwilling to receive the requisite feedback, let alone integrate the new information in order to grow.

Please stay out of my office

Not to go all John Lennon on you but imagine there's no bullying. Imagine there's no addiction. Imagine there's no violence. Those are my dreams. But my dreams aside, this is about you as much as it is about me. I want YOU to be healthy. I want YOU well. I want YOU to raise YOUR kids properly and to love YOUR mate thoroughly. I want you healthy enough not to need my services.

Along the way, I invite you to hold loosely to your profession as it pertains to your personhood. If someone says, "Lawyers suck!" and you notice yourself getting defensive, that's a clue. Maybe look inward and not be so attached. Similarly, if a kid asks for advice on getting into law school and your response is tinged with emotion of any kind, that's also a clue.

A lot more can be written about this phenomenon, but in the meantime please go easy on yourself. Embrace your potential beyond your career and in doing so, you will probably find greater satisfaction and less stress. Lawyering is what you do, not who you are.

JAKE WISKERCHEN is a marriage and family therapist licensed in Nevada. He is a published subject matter expert in firearms injury prevention and has spent six years volunteering his time with Nevada-based nonprofit Walk the Talk America in bridging the gap between the mental health and gun communities to prevent suicide by firearm. His agency, Zephyr Wellness, is located in Sparks and celebrated its 10th year in business. Its website hosts many resources covering the topics discussed in this article, including videos on emotional functioning, and free and anonymous mental health screenings.



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