

jurisprudence

Letter to a Young Law Student

Don't go to law school: But if you must, take my advice.

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I started law school 10 years ago this week. While you may be aware that I consider the law to be mostly very funny, I take law school pretty seriously. When I started law school I had no idea what I was in for: maybe some hybrid of debate camp and *LA Law*. In actual fact, for me, law school was a cross between boot camp and a cave.

Some small fraction of every incoming One-L class is comprised of people destined to take the legal world by storm. These are the people who intend to get straight A's, outline every case, make law review, clerk for a Reagan appointee, and spend the rest of their days in a leviathan corporate law firm where they will do whatever it is that's done in such places. These are the people law school was built for: people who think in zero-sum terms about everything—grades, jobs, and salaries. I wish them the very best of luck for the next three years. This advice is not for them.

This advice for the rest of you—who applied to law school simply because you took the LSATs, and who took the LSATs simply because the MCATs were too hard. This advice is for the people who graduated college with the generalized sense that they ought to be doing good works on this planet but were uncertain how to go about it. In short, this advice is for those of you who, like me, went to law school hoping that the experience would be stimulating and/or mind-expanding; a liberal-arts grad school for political people. Because you are doubtless trying to memorize the "blue book" this week, this advice is pre-outlined for your convenience.

A. Know Why You Are Going

1. As noted, the majority of people who get swept up into the law schools of North America are there as a result of inertia, career confusion, or some combination of both, and not a searing passion for drafting complex discovery motions. But that same inertia that swept you into law school may just sweep you into a corporate career in which you never had any interest. If you're at law school because you burn to work at a big firm, or because teaching torts cranks you beyond all imagining, have at it. But if you're there because your dad dressed you in Michigan Law footie-pajamas, or you love writing, or you vaguely hope to do something about the rainforest, you'll want to work hard to avoid being sucked into the screaming centripetal force that is the corporate law firm.
2. So, write yourself a letter. Quick, while you still *can* write. Write it, seal it, and then open it at graduation. Tell your post-law-school self

what you'd hoped to do with that J.D. Acknowledge that you'll leave law school with huge loans, but you knew that going in. Tell yourself that if you take a job you hate in three years to pay off loans that don't exist until now, you'll emerge in 10 years in the same place you are today. Only balding.

B. Know Why You Are Not Going

1. If there is one law of law-school thinking it's this: "If everyone else wants something, I must want it, too." Not since the days of the Tonka backhoe and Malibu Skipper will you have so lunged for stuff in which you have no real interest, just because everyone else is lunging. Law school manages to impose odd new values on virtually everyone. And each step of the way, law students make choices—to interview with certain firms, take certain classes, apply for certain clerkships—based on an impoverished sense of other options and the fear that other people will get all the good stuff if you don't grab it. This is hard advice to give and harder, I expect, to take. Fear and conformity dig some pretty deep paths at law school. Don't just follow because they are there.
2. Ignore your grades. I mean it. Recognize that you will take some class pass/fail, study from the Nutshell the night before the test, and get an A, whereas you will outline some other class to within an inch of your life, teach a clinic on it, create an outline used by students for the next 70 years, and still get a C+ on the final. Why are all laws of intellectual physics so utterly upended at law school? Hell if I know. Something to do with forests and trees. But my advice is to just ignore the grades. Send 'em home and have your parents call you if you failed something. You will get a job. They don't matter. (Warning: If you don't look at your grades for two years, do not go back after graduation and ask that your con law professor change that C+ to an A. She will laugh very hard and tell you it's a "badge of honor.")

C. Have a Life

1. Someone in my One-L class rendered me semi-autistic in the first semester of law school by suggesting that I'd probably flunk out because I used an orange highlighter. The only person stupider than the moron who said that was me—I changed highlighters. No matter what your original values and habits would dictate, within a matter of weeks you'll be convinced that outlining every case, sucking up to every professor, and spending every non-class hour in the library are the only ways to survive, and that suffering is somehow rewarding and character-building. Mmm. Maybe if you're a pilgrim.
2. I had, for the first six months of law school, only one vector. I traveled from the dorms to the law school. After breakfast in the

dorms I went to class in the law library, and from there I went to dinner in the dorms, which led inexorably to an evening in the law library. Another trench—leading from my bed to the law buildings—from which I was too freaked out to climb out. Somehow one night I ended up in some courtyard in the pouring rain, and then there was a Rodin sculpture and after that, the moon, and I went home and read some Shelley. The next day I felt like I'd gone on a three-week crack bender. Or like I'd had the best conjugal visit ever. Get out. Go to movies. Volunteer someplace. Make friends with the people at Starbucks. Get drunk but kiss someone when you're actually sober. Do anything to remind yourself that there is a life out there, and that missing one night of reading will not turn you into someone who lives in a garment box under the freeway.

All this advice is probably extreme and excessive. Your parents will probably set my house on fire for providing it. But read it anyhow. And think about it. Life is short. Misery is overrated. If law school is what you really want, then do it as yourself and not as if you were in a movie about Harvard men in the 1920s. Learn, question, make a precious lifelong friend, ignore the guy in the bow tie, and smile at the people hunger-striking for the ninth consecutive cause. Use an orange highlighter. Dig your own path. You may pop out in the moonlight. You'll probably be a better lawyer for it.

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