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351 *Embracing the future*

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While I was reflecting upon what to cover in this article it dawned upon me that I am in my fortieth year of law. The first three were in law school, the next ten in private practice, and the last twenty-seven in legal education. All along this path there have been friends and acquaintances that have opted out of the profession. In law school 160 of us started and only 90 finished, some of their own choice, finding law did not interest them as much as they thought, others because the professors felt that their gifts were better suited for different endeavors.

Once we graduated from law school most of my classmates stayed in Nebraska to practice law with private law firms. A few of us, probably less than ten, left the state to practice elsewhere with law firms, government or corporations. But some never practiced law, or did so only for a short time. One of my classmates went to dental school, others into business or other non-law related areas. Over my years here at UDM I know graduates who have done a myriad of non-legal related positions. Some remained in the jobs they had when they started law school. Others left the legal profession after only a short period of time looking for fulfillment elsewhere. One, I am told, even became a puppeteer instead of practicing law. But today I write about those who started in private practice immediately after law school and have remained here to rise to the top of their profession. Now, after forty to fifty years of successful practice, they are asked against their wishes to leave their firms upon their sixty-fifth, sixty-seventh or seventieth birthdays.

The New York Times ran an article about this phenomenon in New York City law firms late last year. I am also aware that the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission is involved with litigation arising out of a Chicago-based law firm's similar practice of requiring partners to step aside or retire later in life. The legalities of such practices are of interest to me professionally, but not for this article. What interests me here is the mind-set of those who desire to stay at the end of their careers in these high-powered, time consuming, stressful jobs. I leave to the psychologists and psychiatrists the professional explanation of why some individuals cannot let go after years of much success and financial rewards. I am sure the explanation varies as much as the individuals. But from my standpoint as a person who feels that my job as a law professor is the best job in the world, I can state, while I love what I do, I do not want to finish life without an opportunity to see what else is available if I am blessed with such an opportunity.

Over the last twenty years I have attended many more funerals and wakes than marriages and christenings. At these funerals and wakes I have never heard anyone state that the deceased's only regret was that he hadn't be able to generate more billable hours. All too often there are regrets expressed that the person did not have the chance to spend more time with the family, a chance to travel, pursue some life-long interest or better know his grandchildren.

This is not to say that after stepping down from a high-powered position with a large law firm you should abandon the law. At the University of Detroit Mercy School of Law we have several talented individuals who as distinguished visiting professors are enjoying the opportunity to pass on their knowledge and expertise to the next generation of lawyers. A number of friends who have "retired" are volunteering as legal service attorneys, working with senior citizens call-lines providing legal services, working with law school clinics and working with various charitable and not-for-profit organizations. I also know several who have gone "cold turkey" from the law and commenced to travel or engage in other non-legal endeavors that they were not able to do in the past because of the demands of the legal profession. I am even aware of one former dean and professor of law who is now studying to be a priest. Others have not been able to go cold turkey, but have transitioned into mediation and arbitration to serve the community in a different legal setting. My point is, there is life after a thirty or forty year career as a partner in a major law firm. This transition should not be viewed as a problem, but an unresolved opportunity. Perhaps this is why the Chinese use the same symbols for the words crisis and opportunity.

We in legal education have been criticized at times for not preparing our students for the practice of law. Some of these criticisms are well-taken. But a similar charge can be levied against the legal profession that it not very adept at preparing us for life after the practice of law. We miss so much of life while assisting others with legal challenges that we often forget to take care of ourselves and pursue our lives. This life will be over before many of us are ready to go, whether that occurs in our sixties, seventies or later. It may be trite to repeat the adage that when one door closes another will open. But that does not mean that it is not true. Embrace life after retirement, don't deny it.

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