Law School Revisited: Reflections on Being a 1L

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I. REFLECTIONS

Mentor: “Is she sure she wants to go to law school? Why does she want to go to law school? She’s going to hate it!”
Friend: “Yes, she is sure. She believes she will be doing something that hasn’t been created yet.”
Mentor: “Oh, okay . . . I feel much better!”

A couple of years before I started law school, my friend told me about the conversation above. I chuckled as I remembered Professor Olsen’s efforts to talk me out of going to law school. He said I wouldn’t like it. After all, he claimed that he didn’t enjoy it, and the horror stories he told me about his year in law school were horrible indeed. He quit after that one year. Although Professor Olsen was a man whom I deeply respected, I had to trust myself and follow my intuition about where I believed I needed to go.

Professor Olsen was not the only person to try to talk me out of law school. Many other people did too, including a pre-law advisor at my undergraduate university. A re-entry director at the community college I was planning to attend responded when I told her that I wanted to go to law

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school: “We have an excellent paralegal program here.” I usually nodded, listened to my antagonists’ comments, and reminded myself that their comments reflected their experience, not mine. My motto became “help me or get out of my way,” and I never regretted my decision to attend law school.

As I think back on law school, I recall that being a 1L was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. I felt like I was dropped off on a new planet where everyone was speaking a different language and had different customs. Some people understood what was being said and done in classrooms, while others were as lost as I was. I remember rarely raising my hand in class and constantly fearing being called on, especially in the large classes of 125 or more.

Thirteen years later, I have evolved into a professor of law, and I require my students to maintain a Self-Assessment Book (“SAB”)—a thinking and writing journal in which students write reflectively about their learning processes. My own reflections on the tribulations of law school are visible in the personal journal that I kept during my first semester of law school. Reflecting on excerpts of my writing drafted during my time as a 1L reminds me of law school’s unique challenges and reinforces my commitment as a professor to offer reflective writing as an effective survival tool for students trying earnestly to “make it” through this demanding degree.

II. THE JOURNALING PROCESS

As I prepared to leave for the University of California, Los Angeles (“UCLA”), I experienced many different emotions. Although I was an older and supposedly wiser student, I was scared; I was leaving my home, children, mom, dad, family, friends, pets, car, and the neighborhood where I had lived for thirty-five years. I wrote in my journal:

*I’m very afraid of leaving home, my friends, my new beginning, I leave in less than a month...* (7/9/97).

I started taking yoga classes that summer because I knew I was going to need disciplined activities to keep me balanced. I found that the most beneficial yoga practice was to focus on several contemplative practices before and during law school. After I implemented this practice, I wrote:

*I’m feeling calmer in my life, peace. I enjoy the yoga quite a bit; I learned how to do a headstand and also a full backbend this past week; my body is
I was in the process of preparing myself for something I never thought I could do: attend law school. As I recognized the magnitude of my endeavor, I wrote in that same entry:

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I \text{ will be gentle with myself, accept that where I am at is where I’m supposed to be. Listen to my body, my heart more, eat better, laugh, play more, be less serious, less anxious; acceptance will be the key to freedom (7/15/97).}
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UCLA offered a week-long summer law program that I attended. Invigorated both by the program and my own narrative reflection of my development, I wrote:

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\text{I’m in L.A. at UCLA. It’s beautiful here, I’ve met many wonderful people . . . I like living in a dorm, my food is made for me, I just take care of myself. Life is good, I did well in ‘class’ today, I just took a deep breath and said, ‘Okay God, help me out’ (8/10/97).}
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My journaling allowed me to quantify my successes, to celebrate my achievements, and to confirm the success of my approach to my new environment. On my first day of “real” classes, I wrote:

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\text{School started today, boy do I have a ton of homework due tomorrow. I’m pretty happy. Class was a mess! But I did okay; it’s hard, but fun. [A professor] spits and sweats, human (8/25/97).}
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My reflection allowed me to balance my ephemeral response to that experience with the reality of law school’s demands, and at once, to recognize that I would make it through the challenge by noting the eternally human element that even the toughest of professors possessed.

In balance, my journal also reflected occasionally less optimistic feelings. Two days after the last entry, I wrote:

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\text{Wow! I’m exhausted, tired, and afraid, I’m feeling hurt, lonely . . . I sure do get afraid easily. . . . I’m scared I won’t hack it! So be it, most students are afraid right now too. . . . [My}
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youngest son, Javier, was injured playing football]

Help my little Javi, he won’t get to play. God, thanks for loving me. Show me how to be that giving parent to myself and my children. I’m crying a lot. I cry more when I’m tired. Thank you for your love, the sun, my bike, my health, the new people I meet. Anyway, I really let go and I find my friend, my freedom in uncertainty, . . . I release and I promise that whatever happens I walk in Beauty, love, care and hope. . . . I’m going to take a hot bath, relax, read, rest, eat! (8/27/97).

I realized in reviewing these entries that I was excited, happy, and overwhelmed to be in law school at UCLA. My entries at times became a “dialogue” with the God of my understanding. Reviewing what I wrote from a critical perspective, I noticed that I was always able to balance my sadness with the optimism that I found in God and my family. I’m thankful that my journal gave me an outlet to express myself honestly and freely, and I suspect that many others facing the same sorts of challenges in law school would benefit from finding such a balance in whatever elements of their lives make them happy and peaceful.

Poignantly, my next entry stated:

It’s been a while since I’ve journaled. I’m trying to remain balanced; it’s hard but good. . . . Classes are hard, but it is so fun being challenged, my brain is stretching (9/4/97).

Today, in 2010, I don’t remember that it was “so fun being challenged.” The “fun” part seems to have faded in my memory, but I recall telling people that my brain actually felt like what a “Klingon” from Star Trek looked like when it was having an allergic reaction. I also wrote:

“I’m learning to be easy on myself, today I didn’t turn in two copies of an assignment, but I rushed to the computer lab and got another one. I tried not to freak out; it worked. Tomorrow I’m going to wake up, brief my case, ride my bike, do yoga, go to class, come “home” and work on my outlines. We may meet for a study group (9/4/97).”

As my entry reflects, it takes time to “balance” one’s life. My goal for each week was to:
I worked these activities into my busy 1L life because they were important for me to maintain balance. Using contemplative practices as well as other practices helped me to keep my ultimate goal in mind, and I remained mindful of my guiding question: “How can I best serve?”

I was also calmer and more peaceful. I could “dump” my feelings, both positive and negative, into my journal and not onto the people in my life. I was a much more pleasant person to be around, and my thoughts didn’t race nearly as much as they had before I started journaling.

Leaving my children was the hardest part of making my decision to attend law school in Los Angeles. I missed them so much. They stayed in Arizona with their father, Tom, and step-mother, Lisa. I thought of them often. When I wrote in my journal, I would ask God to care for them while I was away:

Take care of my children, Thomas (16), Reuben (14), Javier (10), Catarina (7). My beautiful babies (9/9/97).

I wrote frequently about my children, which reflected the amount of time I spent thinking about them while I was away:

I miss my kids a lot, my heart hurts very much! (9/9/97).

Almost a month away from my kids. I miss them so much, I have to trust I’m right where I need to be, thanks Creator (9/12/97).

Here again, writing in my journal allowed me to express my pain, but also to find the balance that God provided for me. Perhaps the simple act of journaling encouraged me to notice that the balance in my writing between discomfort and God’s help. This manifested itself in my life and helped provide the balance that I so strongly cherished.

A particularly difficult incident comes to mind. I missed my children greatly, and to compound matters, two of my sons, Reuben and Javier, both had football injuries. The guilt and sadness I felt for not being there to comfort them was overwhelming. At that point, I had to believe that attending law school was a spiritual act for me. I could have easily stayed in Arizona for law school; I was accepted at both state schools. But I again
turned to the question, “How can I best serve?” I try to ask this question on a daily basis.

I remember that when I was considering attending school out of state, I asked several of my own stakeholders– my children, my parents, Tom, and Lisa–how they would feel if I left. All of them told me enthusiastically, “Go for it!” My mom said, “Go do your thing!” I wanted someone to say, “No, you can’t go, you can’t leave your kids.” But my kids were excited for me, and so were my parents. Tom and Lisa had just purchased a large house where the kids had their own rooms and would remain in the same school. I valued stability and had lived on the same street where I grew up for thirty-five years. To this day, my home is across the street from my parents’ home. As I recall missing my sons while they recovered from their football injuries, I also recall knowing that I was facing a rare and special opportunity and that my relatively brief absence would allow me to “serve better.” The door opened wide, and I took the next step into the unknown.

During that first semester, sadness came in many forms, and I used my journal as an outlet and an active means of contemplation. I wrote, for instance:

My hero died today. Mother Teresa passed on in her sleep. Her death hit me hard, so many sad things this week. Princess Di, Mother Teresa, missing my kids (9/9/97).

But my journaling also became my forum for engagement with the cultural matrix around me. I noted Arizona news:

Hey, Fife, Gov. of AZ, resigned; he was convicted of fraud! (9/9/97).

(I’m surprised I didn’t write out the elements.) I also became poetic at times:

Grief strikes at the heart, I’m so sad right now! I’ve kept the grief at bay and now the night howls (9/9/97).

And my ‘balancing act’ continued. I realized that although I was sad,

I’m going to laugh again, I’m just sad right now and I’ll be okay, I am okay right now too. Tears are okay with me, life is good, even when I’m sad, my light is above the cloud and when the cloud passes I will smile again (9/9/97).
Eventually, my journaling became my outlet for celebration. The weekend before my birthday that year, a dear friend, Mary Anne, who lived in Long Beach, picked me up and I stayed with her, her husband and their sweet pug, Winnie. We had such a wonderful time together. We rode our mountain bikes, took long naps and long walks on the beach. I wrote:

> It was too funny, I actually forgot I was in law school. I thought I was on vacation. We all need weekends like that. Anyway, I also fell asleep in Arenella’s [criminal law] class (9/15/97).

My journaling evolved as I navigated the challenges of law school, and it became a principle mode of contemplation and my primary outlet for internal dialogue. Through numerous entries, I continued to seek comfort and balance by writing about my thoughts of my Creator. Although life seemed difficult at the time, I tried to maintain a positive attitude:

> Thank you Creator for your love, care and wonderful people you put in my life. I am a lucky woman, filled with love and care. I trust you Creator, trust that I am where I need to be, thank you for being with me yesterday with [the] tormentor teacher, I’m not perfect, but I didn’t defend myself—just stated what I thought (9/17/97).

I don’t recall the exact details of that day and I didn’t write about them, but the persistent balance in the narrative of my journal suggests that I faced a challenging situation by considering my spiritual position and balancing that against my adversity. Journaling gave me a place to write about my fears, emotions, and experiences without judgment, and for this I am grateful.

As I neared the end of the journal, I wrote the following:

> Life, what a Paradox
> happy, sad, angry, calm,
> fat, thin, lonely, all-one,
> so it is, I feel all these
> feelings, but what about life?
> Who is she? Why does she extract such a high
> price? I kid
> her not, I join in her laughter her
> playfulness, I respect her quiet,
> quiet which rages in the storm
Shh, Shh, I am alone, I
stand alone, tall, brave, with courage, enough

. . . I
yearn to understand the quiet, the rage,
the joy, the laughter, all
all represent who I am, we are
Gods and Goddesses in disguise,
playing with fire, the fire
within calls me forth to dance,
dance, I shall remain, . . .

I am home, in me, in my body so I remain
(9/18/97).

I am thankful that I journaled about this time and that I can now share it with others facing a similar climb. I hope that what I’ve shared demonstrates that journaling is a wonderful tool that can be incredibly helpful for students getting through law school, especially in that first year and first semester. My journal was a safe place for me to express myself in a way that I didn’t or perhaps couldn’t any place else. I look back at that time with the eyes of a woman thirteen years older, but the “I” who wrote it then captured what I was going through as I went through it: the pain, the joy, the excitement, the fear, and even the anger and despair that I felt at times. I realized through journaling and reflection that they were only “feelings” and they didn’t “kill” me, even though at times they felt unbearable. Journaling made it such that I could write about them – that I could ‘contain them in my writing’ – and that I did not have to re-live them.

I needed to feed my spirit by following my dream and my intuition, which was the main reason I went to law school. I was determined to keep balance in my life, especially because I was in law school. During this time, I was away from my family, my friends, my supporters, and my Church. To help make up for this, I journeled, practiced yoga, rode my bike to “catch a sunset,” meditated, and created a local support system. I also continued to maintain my relationships back home. Journaling remained an essential and ubiquitous comfort; it gave me insights into my “inner” life when I wrote how I was reacting to my “outer” life. I used those insights to live a more effective and joyous life when I could easily have suffered in the exhausting and challenging world of law school.

III. STUDENT JOURNALING ASSIGNMENT

As a law professor, I bring to my classroom several techniques that echo my growth as a result of journaling, and that I hope feed my students’
spirits as journaling did my own. In my classes we take a moment of silence (a brief meditation), students write in their SAB (reflective writing), and students respond to a “Balance in Legal Education” question. I use these techniques because I found them helpful as a 1L, and many of my students have told me, in conversation or in their writings, that they are helpful to them too.

The unifying feature about each of these activities is that students must engage in contemplative consideration as a balance to their harried law school lives. They must slow down, pay attention to themselves, balance their challenges with their successes, and find their own reassurance, as I found my own spirituality in my first-semester journaling. Each of these contemplative activities addresses the chief challenges I faced as a law student, and encourages students to seek balance in even the most unlikely of classes.

I teach Commercial Law, a class perceived to be rigid and unchanging, guided by its principle text, the often-dreaded Uniform Commercial Code. Perhaps surprisingly, even in an area of law in which reference to a governing “code” dictates success and failure, students thrive when they balance their attention to this very exacting text with an equally dedicated focus on themselves and their own internal well-being.

Taking a moment of silence allows students to clear their minds of the static from their busy days. It allows them to find tranquility and balance and to direct their already-sapped energy resources at the daily tasks of the class. Since tranquility is essential for focus, silencing the chaos in a first year student’s mind is essential to reaping the best benefits of their efforts.

Writing in a SAB allows students to track their own progress without reprimand and forces them to account for their performance by committing their efforts to words. Without a required reflective exercise, students rarely take time to step away from their own work, see it in context, and make macro-level changes for their own benefit and academic success.

Answering a “Balance in Legal Education” question forces students to step outside the dynamics of the particular class. Students too often forget that for every axiom in a particular area of practice, there are countless other ways to look at the same problems through different lenses. The practice of law often suffers from myopia, and requiring students to think outside the proverbial “box” engages their brains and their collective learning experiences in exciting and often surprising ways. One example of a “Balance in Legal Education” question is found in the following instruction set:

- Set a timer for two minutes. Write your answers to the following questions (don’t worry about spelling
or sentence structure; just write for the entire two minutes):

- If you could do any job that you wanted to, without worries about money or time, what would it be?
- After you have written your response, reread it and answer: What does this response tell you?

Asking students to consider what kind of work they would do regardless of time or money and asking them to do it outside the confines of a Commercial Law classroom dynamic leads students to reflect upon their chosen path and to learn perhaps something new about themselves from their responses.

The benefits of contemplation are manifold, and my experience as a student, memorialized in part by journaling and striving for a personal and academic balance, have motivated me to pass these benefits on to my students. Perhaps when law schools offer their introductory classes or workshops, they might do well to encourage students to find their balance as early in their legal education as possible. Journaling is a valuable tool, proven effective through my own experience, my reflection on that experience, and the teaching I offer to my students.