



Love for Lawyers: Some reflections on mental health, faith and the legal profession

By Jonathan Hyde, Director at DWF Law LLP and LCF Chair of Trustees

Deep down, lawyers are really nice people?

When I told my dad that I wanted to train to be a solicitor, he took the news better than I thought. I'd asked him to front the first chunk of fees and living expenses for law school as well, which were hefty even in those days, and he took that in good humour. Such good humour, that he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, *"Do you know why they bury lawyers six feet underground?"*. Genuinely unsure, I gamely asked why. *"Because,"* he said, *"deep down they're really nice people"*.

I appreciated my parents' support in training to be a solicitor, at the outset and since, and smiled at my dad's joke then (and am still smiling at it now). But as I've spent time practising law in the City, I've had cause to reflect on that joke in different ways over the years.

To be honest many of the lawyers that I've met have been very nice people on the surface, as well as deep down. I have a long list of colleagues who I treasure, and many fellow lawyers who I respect – particularly in the LCF! There are also people who I'm glad not to bump into again, but I suspect that's not so different from any other career, profession or industry.

Yet I wonder if lawyers hold a particular, and not always treasured, place in the public consciousness. If you're lucky, a lawyer on TV might be a tireless crusader for justice, righting wrongs with their tie undone and shirt sleeves rolled up, with every piece of law at their fingertips and no apparent need to sleep, eat or have friends (which might not be great for your mental health in the long run!) If you're unlucky, a lawyer on TV might be a grey bureaucrat who delights in crushing the little people for the highest paying client (Mr Burns' attorney from *The Simpsons*, I'm looking at you). Some shows or movies think we might be better off without lawyers at all in the future, so justice can be dispensed more effectively (anyone old enough to remember Judge Dredd?!)

Wellbeing in the legal profession

Either way, I'm not sure that lawyers are the top of anyone's list when it comes to their personal wellbeing. Which is a problem, because there seems to be real concerns about lawyers' wellbeing, especially among the most junior members of the profession.

The Junior Lawyers' Division ("JLD") of The Law Society in particular has been expressing concerns about junior lawyers' wellbeing and resilience for the past few years¹. This has coincided with growing international interest in lawyers' wellbeing and mental health. Happily, this is resulting in increasing initiatives within the profession to understand and deal with poor wellbeing in lawyers, including the LCF's recent series on mental health².

¹ <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/campaigns/junior-lawyers-division-campaigns/wellbeing>

² <https://lawcf.org/resources/library/app/type/video>



The JLD's concerns about junior lawyers' wellbeing prompted a very helpful study by Professor Richard Collier of Newcastle Law School, which came out last year³. This identified a number of recurring themes, including stigma around poor wellbeing or mental health; legal practice and the route into it being described as *"anxiety-inducing"*; a lack of teaching and training around wellbeing at law school; and the impact of long working hours and client demands. Professor Collier also suggested that lawyers might be their own worst enemies, by nature people who are *"insecure overachievers' with tendencies towards 'perfectionism' and 'imposter syndrome'"* – quite a diagnosis, if not entirely inaccurate! There was also no single experience of poor wellbeing or mental health, with different people and different genders struggling, and dealing with it, in different ways.

A further study earlier this year, by Lucinda Soon at Birkbeck⁴, found that lawyers scored lower than the national average on wellbeing, and lower than other hard-pressed professions such as teachers, vets and GPs. Scores were markedly lower for female lawyers, and also for more junior lawyers including trainees. The chink of light was that senior lawyers (with 15 years' PQE or more) reported greater wellbeing, which Ms Soon attributed to them experiencing many of the factors commonly associated with good psychological wellbeing, such as autonomy at work, being connected and supported, and the perception of competence.

Tackling wellbeing challenges and improving mental health

What should be done about this? The JLD and Professor Collier agree that a three-pronged approach is needed:

- tackling workplace culture;
- providing support; and
- ensuring appropriate training and education in mental health literacy.

Certainly, any solution must be as complex as the problems that it seeks to tackle, and work on both the macro level (targeting the whole profession) and the micro level (within the workplace culture of each office).

It is good to see attention being paid to this issue, and steps taken to begin to address it. In doing so, it is important not to confuse training alone with a solution. For example, it is not enough to provide resilience training and then expect lawyers to be "tough enough" to handle matters as they currently stand.

One positive example of tackling this issue holistically is the Mindful Business Charter that is gaining traction among many law firms, including DWF, and other businesses⁵. This sets out a number of simple practical steps that can change culture quite dramatically. It was good to see IT remind everyone in June to think about *when* we send emails, especially during COVID-19 when working hours can be unusual. For businesses, there is a clear case for happy employees who cause their workplace to prosper in turn.

³ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/newcastleuniversitylawschool/files/RC%20Briefing%20Digital.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.lawabsolute.com/recruitment-news/article/wellbeing-of-lawyers-worse-than-gps-and-teachers-says-study>

⁵ <https://mindfulbusinesscharter.com>



Wellbeing and Christ

Speaking personally, I have found my Christian faith vital in the area of mental health and wellbeing at work. There are studies showing that “religious people” are happier in general⁶, but for me it goes beyond (but is no less than!) attending church. I find the whole perspective on my life and my work provided by Scripture to be enormously helpful, and I hope in ways that might be useful to everyone.

For some highlights:

Knowing that I am not defined by my successes or failures at work, but have value apart from them. I am valuable because I am created in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:27), and because Christ gave His life to redeem me from my sin and the penalty it carried (Rom 5:8). Work cannot add to that, or take away from it. Finding your identity anywhere else, including in either failure or success, can be equally destructive!

Perfectionism can be deeply unhelpful, and finds no place in Scripture. Even Christ’s command for us to be “perfect”, as some translations give Matthew 5:48, might better be rendered “complete”⁷.

Trying to be glad for others in their successes and achievements, and not jealous or think I need to be like them. Coveting in this way is toxic for us, as God well knows (Ex 20:17).

Another oldie, but absolutely vital – especially for lawyers – we need regular times of proper rest. God set the pattern for healthy living and working right at the beginning (Gen 2:2-3), and commanded His people to do the same (Ex 20:8-11). It’s not an optional extra, but an essential rule for living well.

Appreciating that working life is like a lift – unavoidably full of ups and downs. Expecting that rough times will come can soften the blow of the bad days (or weeks – or months!), as can the knowledge that they will ultimately pass. Because these storms will always come, it is so important that we build our lives on His word (Mt 7:24–27).

“Everything is meaningless!” said a wise teacher (Ecc 1:2), and some days it can certainly feel that way. But having a realistic expectation of work, and not expecting it to make you feel complete or to give your life meaning, can help you to enjoy it more. Legal practice and law may not solve all the world's problems, but it still has a valuable role to play.

Nevertheless, we do not work like those who have no hope. We can be confident that God will ultimately reconcile all things to Himself through the Cross (Cl 1:19–20). In the meantime, our work – including our legal work – has value when we do it in service of Christ (Cl 3:23–24).

“Treat others as you would have them treat you” is another golden rule from Christ himself. (Lk 6:31). Unsurprisingly, following Christ’s teaching brings us life. Seeking to treat everyone – colleagues, contractors, opponents, clients – with respect and compassion can make the whole experience much better.

⁶ <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/Religion%20and%20well-being%208%20combined.pdf>

⁷ W. van der Hart, *The Perfectionism Book* (IVP: 2016).



It's ok not to know everything, but it's vital to be humble enough to ask and to learn (Pr 18:13).
Listening as much as (or more than) you speak is a good start (Pr 19:20)!

And finally...

If I could offer one further, and final, piece of advice from my own journey, and years of supervising junior colleagues, it would be this. I think this can be enormously challenging when you first start work as a trainee or junior lawyer, as you are probably used to succeeding well in many things that you tackle. It can feel massively unsettling to move into something where you are, in effect, starting to learn all over again. But that's nothing to be ashamed of. Therein lies one of the constant challenges of law, in that you never feel you have "arrived", but also one of its greatest rewards as you grow as a professional over time.

Practising law is a life-long journey where you are constantly developing, reflecting, improving and learning. It is vital that all lawyers, but perhaps especially junior lawyers, and their colleagues, however senior, are kind and give them permission to undertake this journey, and not unreasonably expect themselves to ace everything the first time, or all of the time. Christian lawyers should be deeply familiar with living in this way, walking as disciples of Christ themselves who are constantly learning from their Master.