

LET'S PUT RESILIENCE IN THE CURRICULUM



Lori Wald

When I arrived at law school in the autumn of 1979, I knew the course load would be daunting, the academics challenging, and that my fellow students were probably all a little smarter than me. What I wasn't prepared for was the way the law school curriculum left no space for uncertainty, self-doubt and especially vulnerability. There were difficult questions from my professors and clever retorts from fellow students who all appeared to be a lot less intimidated than me. The idea, as I interpreted it, was to shatter any semblance of incertitude that might exist in me and if that was not possible, second best alternative was to scuttle any part of that kind of temperament into the deepest recesses of my psyche, so deep that neither my fellow students nor my professors would ever suspect I was only pretending to be secure and confident.

Had I been less tenacious, I would have quit. But I stayed, practicing my poker face in the mirror, never grasping what I lacked was an alternative to help me regain balance after facing adversity.

Years later, a friend offered me an opportunity to learn about mindfulness meditation and I accepted. The takeaway was that sitting still in a focused, intentional way allowed me to approach my vulnerability with compassion, courage, and kindness and that, my friends, would have come in mighty handy during my law school years. The swampy aftermath of confrontation is a fertile breeding ground for self-doubt and the spinning of unkind stories repeated over and over until we're completely convinced of their truth. Through a mindfulness meditation practice, I have learned to observe my thoughts, untangle myself from

them and be more open to the possibilities of the present moment.

As it happens, some law schools have changed things up. When a 3L at Northwestern Pritzker School of Law told me about his professor, Len Riskin, who as part of a Conflicts Negotiation class instructed his students on mindfulness meditation, something clicked. I thought — huh, I'm a lawyer. I have a meditation practice. What if I were to bring the practice of mindfulness meditation to the legal community?

I emailed Professor Riskin and he gave me advice that went something like this: All you really have to do to get started is to get a law school to agree to let you talk in front of their students. After a few twists and turns, my alma mater, Case Western Reserve University School of Law, gave me a chance to stand in front of a group of their students and talk about mindfulness meditation. At the end of my talk, I guided the students through a meditation. When they opened their eyes, they sat around for a loopy few minutes before they filed out of the room. Many of them thanked me. From there, I went on to get a gig at a law firm, then to teach a continuing legal education class and I eventually became a board member of the Mindfulness in Law Society, where Professor Riskin is also on the board.

Now, the task gets tricky. As it turns out, lawyers tend to be skeptical and are excellent at holding up their resistance to trying this practice. I say this lovingly. I'm a skeptic myself and I understand the drawbacks to an activity that will result in zero billable time.

Law school is the place where I was taught to think like a lawyer, something for which I am forever grateful. The analytical skills I learned there proved

invaluable not just for representing clients, but for dealing with any tricky situations that might arise. But the lesson that vulnerability was something to be shunned and avoided at all costs, not so valuable. My school had no Professor Riskin to broach the subject of mindfulness and the way a mindfulness meditation practice can bolster resiliency and help promote focus, composure and clarity. When you find yourself at your most tender and vulnerable, there is a way to acknowledge this and to also acknowledge that yes, it's a brutal place to be but it's a temporarily brutal place and soon enough there's going to be another place and then another and then another and to be mindfully aware of all the thoughts that tend to dismantle your emotional scaffolding.

For law students and for lawyers, stressful events cannot be avoided, but we can learn to expand our options as to how we respond to the stressful events. Resiliency is the ability to get back in balance after facing adversity and a mindfulness meditation practice is simply a method where you pause, observe your thoughts and also observe where you get stuck in your own story. There are many alternatives in moments of uncertainty and adversity and through some mindfulness training those alternative become accessible.

Before she learned to meditate, Lori Wald practiced law for about 20 years. She now teaches meditation workshops for lawyers and other people with busy brains. She has been a CMBA member since 2015. You can read her musings on meditation at IntentionalLawyer.com. She can be reached at (216) 236-3739 or loriwald1@gmail.com.