

A Letter to My 5th Year Associate Friend

Dear Sam,

I enjoyed dinner with you and Judy several weeks ago. I have had time now to reflect on the thoughts you expressed about starting over and, possibly, abandoning your law career entirely..

You are the best associate who has ever worked with me, and I find it a shame that your thoughts have taken this turn.. On the other hand, both while you worked with me and after you left me, I was always worried about you burning out. It is ironic that the traits that make you a great associate are the very ones that lead to burn out. You have always done excellent work. You have what I call an inquisitive mind, meaning you want to know all aspects of a project and want to search for the best solutions for the client. You do what it takes to get the job done, even if it means working all weekend or pulling an all-nighter. These very positive attributes lead to you being in great demand by senior lawyers and by our clients and, unfortunately, lead to the situation you are considering now.

Here are some thoughts I would like to share with you. First, all of us at one time or another question whether we want to be a lawyer. I questioned my career path as early as my first year in law school when I was both bored and intimidated. Nine years after I finished law school, in 1980, I questioned whether I wanted to continue. In that year, I lost a jury case. I was so devastated by the loss that I wondered if I was cut out for a lawyer's life. I learned from that experience that even though losing is very painful, it also causes a lawyer to think and reflect about many things. At that point, I really wasn't having fun and I was growing restless. When I look back on those years, I am always reminded of the Peggy Lee song: "Is That All There Is.?" The lyrics include the following: "Is that all there is, is that all there is? If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing, Let's break out the booze and have a ball, If that's all there is." There have been times in my career when I wondered if that's all there was..

How did I move out of my Peggy Lee discouragement? I actually did two things. First, I started by keeping written track of work I enjoyed and which clients I liked best. Second, I developed a plan based on my definition of success and my goals. I discovered through this process that I really liked serving contractors and started focusing my client development efforts on obtaining more work from them. I wrote a law review article to build my reputation. In 1981 I made my first presentation to a group of contractors at their annual convention. That led to many other speaking opportunities. Because of the speaking I did, in 1984 I was asked to write a monthly column for contractors in a trade publication. As you know I have been writing the column each month for 20 years now.

I also changed how I was looking at things. I had previously focused on what I did as a lawyer and my success. I realized that for me the real pleasure was focusing on making a difference for clients. As a result, I redefined my career success around understanding and providing what construction contractor clients needed in a more effective way than my competitors. I discovered contractor clients were less interested in what I did than they were in whether I was providing what they needed. Very few of my contractor clients wanted to litigate their disputes. They wanted to resolve them. So, I focused on negotiation and alternative dispute resolution.

Later I focused on preparing requests for additional compensation in a manner that would most likely result in a positive resolution. I decided I would focus on transportation construction, and I set a goal of becoming the best known lawyer in that industry within five years. All of a sudden I had a different perspective. Those haunting words: “Is that all there is?” were no longer in my mind. Instead, I was on a “Colorado Rocky Mountain High.” As John Denver aptly sung: “He was born in the summer of his twenty-seventh year.”

Well, Sam, I can’t tell you what will give you a “Colorado Rocky Mountain High,” but I can offer some ideas on how to discover it. First, discover your purpose. At one point in time, law was a calling for you. Re-examine why that was the case. Second, focus on being a whole person, not just a lawyer. Plan your week around both your personal and professional positions or roles. Make time to do personal things you value like bicycling and spending time exploring meaningful places with Judy. Third, keep track of what you really love to do and the clients for whom you love to work. I think I know the answers to both of those questions, but it will be ever so much more powerful for you to make the discovery yourself, even if I am right. Once you are clear on the type of work and clients you love, work on a plan designed to getting more of those opportunities. Also, make sure you are defining career success and enjoyment correctly and prioritize the things that matter most to you.

Sam, you have great potential to be a very special lawyer and trusted advisor for your clients. You deserve to have fun developing your great potential, and I believe the suggestions I have outlined for you will help. I am available any time to help you brainstorm and talk through your ideas. Take care, my friend, and give my best to Judy.