

# It's a Career, Not a Contest

HON. ROY FERGUSON

In July, the James Webb Space Telescope yielded the most detailed and far-reaching image of the universe the world has ever seen.

It was especially moving for lawyers, who now can see just how much revolves around them.

All right, fine. It's a cheap shot. But that doesn't mean it's wrong.

## The Shocking Truth

I can save you 10 years of sleepless nights, anxiety, self-doubt, and heartache with four words. Ready? Here they are: "You're not that important."

Take a minute to absorb that simple statement. Read it again. Now ask yourself, "How did I react?"

Did you roll your eyes, or perhaps think, "Well, *duh*"? The odds are good that it was one of the two. The former indicates narcissism; the latter, imposter syndrome—two seemingly opposite conditions that plague the legal community. They are connected by a core characteristic—inauthenticity—and share a fundamental belief: "What people think of me is what matters most."

## Narcissists and Imposters

Narcissists have an inflated sense of self-importance. They aggressively convince themselves that they are better than everyone else—lawyers as a profession score high (in the top six) on the narcissism scale.

You may be thinking, "I don't feel that way. I *know* I'm not better than anyone else. I'm just faking it and hoping no one figures out the truth." This belief—that you are an intellectual fraud who somehow fools people into believing you are exceptional—is also extremely common among young lawyers. It's called "imposter syndrome." Sufferers believe they must work harder than every-

one around them because if even one person discovers the truth, the house of cards will collapse. They are perfectionists, fearing that even the tiniest mistake may bring it all down. They live in a perpetual state of panic, believing the worst about themselves and discounting anything to the contrary, including successes and achievements. (Compliment this person, and rather than improving their opinion of themselves, it lowers their opinion of you for being so easily fooled.)

Narcissists believe they are more than they are and inflate their accomplishments to convince others of their superiority. Imposters believe they are less than they are and downplay their accomplishments so others will flatter them. But they are driven by the same desperate desire—to maintain an artificially high reputation.

## "Free" Time? What's That?

Many young attorneys believe they can't miss a single day of work. Narcissists believe their clients' lives would fall apart, while imposters are convinced that everyone would realize how worthless they are. Driven by fear, they work feverishly and unceasingly. Nights. Weekends. Holidays. They sacrifice their health and their relationships. They feel guilty when they aren't working. Skeptical? Answer this question: "What do you do in your free time?" I'll bet you a donut that you thought something like, "I don't have any 'free' time."

Young lawyers often go years without taking a real vacation. Sure, they might go out of town for a few days now and again, but they are still working or obsessing about work and feeling guilty for everything they aren't doing. I know because I was one of them. It took me 10 years to realize one simple but liberating fact: "I'm not that important." Here's how it happened.

It was another Saturday night at the office, around midnight. Exhausted, I debated whether to drive home or sleep on the office

couch. In far west Texas, driving at night is dangerous. Our Dark Skies laws prohibit nighttime illumination, so it's usually pitch black. I thought, "I can't risk it. If I die on the highway, all the people counting on me would be screwed." And it suddenly hit me. *No, they wouldn't.* They would hire different lawyers within days. Their cases would get resolved without me. *I wasn't the only person who could help them.* And if I took a few days off, the work would still be waiting for me when I got back. I laughed at myself and said aloud, "You know, I'm just not that important!" And I went home.



## A Painful Epiphany

This is a difficult truth to accept. Self-awareness takes professional confidence and introspection that typically comes with experience. But the sooner you realize it, the better. Your health, your family, and your life may depend on it.

Narcissists suffer from alcohol abuse disorder at four times the rate of the general population. Marijuana abuse, three times. Imposter syndrome is also associated with higher rates of substance abuse and addiction. So, it is no surprise that 37 percent of lawyers self-report substance abuse and addiction problems.

These people can't bear to be seen as failures. They are more worried about public perception than reality. It's not that they must *be* the best; they must be *perceived* that way. They put an incredible amount of unnecessary pressure on themselves in an already-stressful job. Both have an abnormally high suicide rate, which makes sense. They are more afraid of public embarrassment than of death. And 11 percent of lawyers consider or attempt suicide. More than one in ten. How many law students were in your class? How many lawyers are in your office? Do the math.

Realizing I'm not that important changed my life. I went home for dinner. I stopped working seven days a week. For the first time in my career, *I took a real vacation*: no phone, no email, no laptop. I left work behind. And you know what? The world didn't stop spinning! I came back refreshed, recharged, and excited about work. I slept better. I smiled more. And my work product improved! It made me a better lawyer and a happier human being. I just wish it hadn't taken 10 years to figure it out.

## Say It with Me

You are worthy of the accolades you get. You earned your achievements. You aren't fooling anyone, much less everyone. And yet as valuable as you are at work, you aren't irreplaceable. You deserve to be happy. So, turn off your phone at night, enjoy your weekends, and don't feel guilty for being human. And please, TAKE A VACATION!

**HON. ROY FERGUSON** PRESIDES OVER THE 394TH DISTRICT COURT—THE LARGEST JUDICIAL DISTRICT IN TEXAS—AND SERVES BY ASSIGNMENT ON THE 8TH DISTRICT COURT OF APPEALS. YOU CAN FOLLOW HIM ON TWITTER @JUDGEFERGUSONTX.

### WORD!

*"DON'T ACCEPT YOUR DOG'S ADMIRATION AS CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE THAT YOU ARE WONDERFUL."*

—ANN LANDERS



### THE POST-NORMAL TIMES

## FAREWELL TO THE POST-NORMAL TIMES

J.B. RUHL

It is with bittersweet sentiment that I announce the end of “The Post-Normal Times” column. On the one hand, I am pleased that the legal services industry weathered the Great Recession and the Pandemic and landed on its feet in very good shape. While we may not yet (or ever) be in a “new normal,” lawyers seem ready and well-equipped to navigate continued change for the better.

On the other hand, I will miss writing for *TYL* and working with my wonderfully supportive editor, Lindsay Cummings. I enjoyed identifying themes that, I hope, resonated with young lawyers looking to build their careers in a new era of change for the profession. The long and the short of it is, though, that after eight years of covering this beat, change in the profession is no longer novel or disruptive. Quite the opposite, it opens opportunities, especially for young lawyers, that were not present in the “old normal.” Rather than hearing it from me, it is young lawyers who now are in the best position to identify and take hold of these opportunities.

So, I have concluded that the column has fulfilled its purpose and run its course. But I do hope the spirit of Post-Normal Times will live on and inspire you to jump in, mix it up, and keep change in the profession a positive force, not just for lawyers but also for our clients and the public. My parting words of advice: think Post-Normal, act Post-Normal, be Post-Normal!

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