

You, *yes you*, can have it all

By Jennifer R. Johnson

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you **not** to be?” [Emphasis in original.]

– *A Return to Love*
by Marianne Williamson¹

When I was a young woman in my late teens and early 20s, my self-confidence was a study in contradictions: I was a skilled pianist with a high musical I.Q., and I had experienced some limited success as an amateur fashion model; but I was also insecure about my intelligence in left-brained subjects, such as science and math, and I was fighting an eating disorder that would take years to overcome.

By my mid-20s, my unfocused career path had further impaired my confidence. Though I was halfway through my nursing degree, I had a non-marketable bachelor’s degree in psychology with a minor in music, and I was working two, sometimes three, waitress jobs just to make ends meet.



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At that pivotal moment, I realized I had an obligation to make the most of my resources – physical, intellectual, social, spiritual and financial. Subsequently, I developed a dream that would lead me to combine the practice of nursing with the practice of law.

This moment of self-awareness has served me well over the last 20 years, and as a lawyer who happens to be a woman, I have arrived at some insights concerning how to be successful in the practice of law. Using the acrostic “D-R-E-A-M,” I have outlined here some pointers that can help all lawyers – regardless of gender – to thrive in their legal careers.

Develop Your Own Vision of **S**uccess

Although I decided in my 20s that I wanted to combine the practices of nursing and law, I didn’t develop a specific vision of success until I turned 40.

Around that time, I was flying back to California from a conference in Florida. To save money, my assistant had booked a circuitous route that took me from Florida to Philadelphia, and, after a long layover, back to California.

For the first leg of the flight, I completed all the billable work I had brought with me. During the layover, I read all the airplane magazines I could get my hands on. Then, with nothing left to do, I decided to plan the rest of my life.

First, I mapped out my life by decade – birth to age 10, age 10 to age 20, age 20 to age 30 and so on. Based on that exercise, I made several significant decisions, including the one to become a plaintiffs’ lawyer.

Many lawyers would agree that years, even decades, can fly by without a moment’s reflection on the direction of your life. When you have other commitments,

such as a spouse or a child, it becomes even harder to ruminate on your goals.

But without a plan, you may find yourself making half-hearted commitments to competing goals or whole-hearted commitments to goals that are inconsistent with your values. Either way, you’ll end up feeling frustrated; so why not set aside some time to develop your own vision of success?

Creating this vision can be a gradual process – it requires solitude, reflection and introspection, which are hard to come by for attorneys of any gender or experience level. Still, I encourage you to write your goals down, because then whenever you feel discouraged – which you inevitably will – you can remember what is important and refocus your efforts.

Ultimately, your definition of success is a question of values – what is important to you in life. And if you are not methodical about identifying these values, others will shape them for you.

Reuse To Be Controlled by **Y**our Fears

Fear can be a great motivator. Much of what I’ve accomplished in life was driven by fear, and I have yet to meet anyone who is truly fearless.

The Honorable Justice Eileen Moore once told me that on her first day as a judge she was worried that she wouldn’t be able to do the job. After pushing back against this fear, she walked into the lunchroom, only to find the atmosphere less than encouraging.

Justice Moore explained: “I walked into the lunchroom shaking inside, as just the previous week I had appeared before several of the judges sitting around the long table. One of them said, ‘Oh, Eileen, what do you say to a woman lawyer with

an I.Q. of 70?" When I said I didn't know, he said, "Good afternoon, your honor."

On hearing this gibe, Justice Moore refused to let her fears control her: "I snapped back, 'What do an intelligent male judge and a U.F.O. have in common?' He shrugged his shoulders, and I responded, 'You hear them talked about a lot, but you seldom spot one.'"

As a young woman, I made a pact with myself that I would never let my fears control me; and while I have not always honored that pact, I can say that I keep to it more than I used to.

After all, many of our fears are irrational. My personal experience has shown that most of what I've feared – that I would fail the bar or that someone wouldn't like a gift – hasn't come to pass. And the fears that became a reality are in the past, so obsessing about them is wasted energy.

What would you do if you knew failure wasn't a possibility? Start your own firm? Set boundaries about how much you would work? Whatever it is, only you can decide whether to play it safe or to live unencumbered by your fears.

Eliminate Distractions

To achieve your goal of success, you must eliminate distractions and become laser-focused on what matters most to you.

One distraction that seems to be universal is the need to compare ourselves to others, rather than celebrating our own uniqueness. Society and the media constantly feed our natural curiosity about other people, which can easily lead to unhealthy comparisons: Who is thinner, better-dressed, smarter or in better shape? Who has better credentials, more cases or more winning verdicts?

Making these comparisons is *always* a

losing proposition, because there will always be someone better than you; and that realization can be discouraging. On the other hand, there will always be someone less accomplished than you, which can engender arrogance.

The bottom line is that you bring to the practice of law all of your unique experiences and passions, as well as your individual educational background and personality. There are certain things that only you can accomplish, so refuse to be distracted by comparison.

Another common distraction is focusing on your weaknesses, failures and hardships. When I began my business, a mentor advised me to figure out what I'm really good at and to delegate the areas where I don't shine – you don't have enough time in life to become accomplished at everything.

He also warned me against letting past failures or present difficulties keep me from working toward my goals. Indeed, I've found that life's challenges can offer the greatest opportunity to make a positive impact.

For example, a friend of mine with an autistic child is now establishing a foundation to help families with autistic children. And because I have two nephews who are wheelchair-bound due to spinal cord injuries, I support a scholarship for disabled athletes – Swim With Mike.

So examine every facet of your life and pinpoint the activities contributing to your dream of success. Eliminate the rest.

Associate With Dreamers

Do you have people in your life who are dream busters? These are people who, for whatever reason, throw cold water on your ideas, saying they cannot be done,

and lead you to walk away wondering why you shared your ideas with them in the first place.

I am not saying to be disrespectful to these dream busters, but success in life is directly related to the quality of people you allow into your inner circle. So it's important to associate with people who are honest and who challenge you to set high goals for yourself.

And regarding those dream busters, identify them and create boundaries. After all, if you are constantly surrounded by negativity, you will begin to doubt your own capabilities.

Fortunately, starting with my first job as a plaintiffs' attorney, I have always experienced a shared energy and optimism with my colleagues about our work on behalf of injured clients; I'm excited to go into the office every day, and for that I am grateful.

Likewise, it's important to avoid closely associating with those who inappropriately focus on disparities such as gender or race. Discrimination is still a reality, but the brave people who fought against inequality have helped to establish a more level playing field, allowing us to focus on the future and on what we can accomplish together.

Mentors: **Be One and Find One**

All lawyers need to mentor a less experienced attorney. You may feel that you are not experienced enough to be a mentor, but you only need to be a few steps ahead of your mentee to provide guidance.

One of the young women I mentor is now in her second semester at a prestigious law school. In 2005, this resilient woman suffered a traumatic accident that left her with a spinal cord injury. After fighting for her life in a hospital over several months, she was told that she would never have

any feeling below her injury and that she would be confined to a wheelchair. Rather than focus on what she had lost, she spent several years in intensive physical therapy to attain the best recovery possible.

Several years ago, this woman invited me to lunch to discuss her dream of becoming a lawyer. Since then, I have observed her courage, determination and perseverance in pursuing this goal; I always leave our encounters humbled and inspired and wondering who's mentoring whom – I am certainly learning as much or more from her than she is learning from me.

If you are not doing so already, I challenge you to commit to a mentorship. I guarantee you will reap benefits beyond what you imagined possible from this relationship.

Moreover, it's vital that you actively seek out at least one mentor to help you avoid unnecessary pitfalls. Having a mentor is important for lawyers of any age or experience level, as one of the great benefits is that you can learn from someone else's mistakes.

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When deciding on this mentor, consider all of your options, including attorneys who have some qualities that you don't aspire to. Indeed, pick and choose characteristics that resonate with you from a number of mentors and make them your own.

Conclusion

In summary, I encourage lawyers, women and men alike, to

D – Develop your own vision of success.

R – Refuse to be controlled by your fears.

E – Eliminate distractions.

A – Associate with dreamers.

M – Mentor: be one and find one.

My soon-to-be 80-year-old mother has lived according to these principles. She believes that whatever she puts her mind to can be accomplished. My mom is a mother of six, a grandmother to nine, a pastor's

wife for more than 40 years, an accomplished pianist and an excellent cook. She worked as a registered nurse for decades and is now a published author with three books and numerous articles.

Recently, my mom announced that she was going back to college online to get her degree in history; she had ordered her transcripts, which are more than 50 years old, and met with an advisor. Mom was born at a time when women became nurses or teachers, and while she did become a nurse, she didn't stop there. To this day, she is reinventing herself and refusing to be restricted by any gender or age limitations.

So don't tell my mom that you can't have it all. If she is living the dream, so can you! ■

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After almost 14 years of working on impact litigation together, the partners of Kiesel Boucher & Larson LLP would like to announce a change in firm name and status. While we had all intended to practice together long into the future, personal circumstances have, unfortunately, made that impossible.

Effective January 1, 2013, the firm name has been changed to Kiesel + Larson LLP. Our former partner, Raymond P. Boucher, has become Of Counsel to the firm. Ray will continue to practice as the Law Offices of Raymond P. Boucher and he will continue to work with our office on selected cases. We wish Ray the best and look forward to the opportunity to collaborate with his new firm on behalf of both current and future clients.

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