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A LETTER TO STUDENTS ON THE MEANING OF WORK AND
PROFESSIONAL FORMATION

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INTRODUCTION

You will soon be a part of a wonderful profession—one that provides opportunities for you to make a formative difference in people’s lives, to work with talented colleagues and against skilled opponents, to earn the respect of others, and to make a generous income while doing so. However, you are also entering a profession with the highest rates of substance abuse, anxiety, and depression among its members—particularly for attorneys within their first ten years of practice.¹ While the rewards of practicing law can be great, so too can be the demands and, at times, the costs. Finding one’s place within the profession while navigating the challenges is a difficult process for all lawyers. In particular, how will you respond when your professional choices or actions challenge your deeply held (but perhaps previously untested) views of yourself? Ultimately, how will you reconcile who you are as a lawyer with who you are as a person?

In almost twenty years as a lawyer in various roles—at large firms, at a corporation, as a solo practitioner, and as a full-time professor—I’ve experienced many of both the trappings and the traps of the profession. Throughout this journey I’ve experienced a profound shift in my professional identity and view of professional formation. As you are about to embark on your own careers, this letter shares some of my experiences regarding professional formation and some of the resources that have been valuable to me along the way. In turn, I’ll address the concept of calling, the inherent value of work, what constitutes the “right” work, and the limits of work.

Much of what follows is based on my identity as a Christian and the tension I’ve experienced while trying to reconcile my faith and my work. I believe the following to be equally relevant, though, to persons of any faith or no faith at all. We all search for meaning in our work. We all struggle with

* Associate Professor of Law, University of St. Thomas School of Law, Minneapolis, Minnesota. I would like to acknowledge the late Brother Bonaventure Scully of the University of Notre Dame, who had the greatest impact on my own professional formation through his encouragement and example over many years of mentorship and friendship. I would also like to thank Professor Jack Sammons at the Walter F. George School of Law, Mercer University, who first challenged me to explore professional formation and identity through a lawyer’s perspective. Finally, I would like to thank my students who have helped provide perspective and meaning to my own career and who continue to inspire me.

¹ See Patrick R. Krill et al., *The Prevalence of Substance Use and Other Mental Health Concerns Among American Attorneys*, 10 J. ADDICTION MED. 46, 51 (2016).

the tension between maximizing comfort and maximizing impact. We all struggle to reconcile our various roles—as an advocate, colleague, mentor, parent, spouse, child, and friend. And we all fall short from time to time.

But first a disclosure: this letter will not provide any answers. These are issues I've struggled with for years—and continue to struggle with today. The key, perhaps, is simply that I have become more comfortable with the discomfort. In fact, I've learned to welcome the discomfort as a sign that I'm still growing, that I haven't settled into a comfortable denial of the "inconvenient" aspects and simply rationalized away these tensions. And, of course, it would be impossible to tell another how to do this. The only way is through lived experience, honest reflection, and self-correction—by sitting with the tension and, to use the term Brené Brown coined, "rumbling" with it.² Your professional formation and identity will be your own. You will make choices you are proud of and some that you regret, but each will be an important step on your path. May this letter provide another perspective as you take those first few steps in your own journey and reach the inevitable forks to come.

MY INTRODUCTION TO PROFESSIONAL FORMATION

To the students at Notre Dame in the 1990s, Father Theodore Hesburgh's presence still loomed large. As one who had the ear of presidents and linked arms with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he was a living example of professional impact, of one who seemed to seamlessly weave together his faith, work, and personal life. I had heard him speak, attended Masses he presided over, and even toured his office at the top of Hesburgh Library—but I had never met him directly. Then, on my last day on campus, immediately after graduation, I saw Father Hesburgh standing in a rare moment alone outside the convocation center. I walked over to him, extended my hand, and introduced myself. He took my hand, looked directly into my eyes for two or three seconds, and simply said, "Do good."

That was it. After four years, I got two words. Do good. Within moments, he was among the swarm of people outside the convocation center, and I was left standing there, knocked a little off balance. His advice was by no means original, and I have no doubt he said that exact phrase to hundreds, if not thousands, of students over the years. But hearing that directly from

² BRENE BROWN, *RISING STRONG* 77–97 (2015). As Dr. Brown writes, the "rumble" is where we "get honest about the stories we[] [make] up about our struggles, to revisit, challenge, and reality-check these narratives[.] . . . [M]oving from our first responses to a deeper understanding of our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors gives birth to key learnings about who we are and how we engage with others." This book is one of the best resources I've encountered for identifying and honestly addressing issues that challenge your view of yourself.

him affected me greatly. Part of it was the awe of finally meeting him. Part of it was the sincerity in his eyes. But no small part of it was simply my first thought: “What the heck does that mean?!” I wanted to run over to him, turn him around, and ask, “But wait—*how* should I do that?”

Of course, he would have had no answer. He put the ball in my court, issued a challenge rather than a direction. I’ve come back to that moment regularly throughout my career: I’m doing well, but am I doing good—am I *truly* doing good? Am I living out God’s plan for me? Does God even have a plan for me? Like millions of others, I have prayed for that answer too: Please, just make clear what you want me to do and I’ll do it. And, like millions of others, I’ve been met with silence. When I look back, I consider that moment with Father Hesburgh my first step toward professional formation. I had certainly considered my professional future before and had vague notions of “helping others,” but that simple encounter injected an aspect of accountability into my heart in a way I had not previously felt. Three months later, I packed up my car, drove to Georgia, and became a law student, just as you are now.

I had the good fortune that professional formation was emphasized at my law school, which was somewhat groundbreaking at the time.³ For years, many professors felt it was presumptuous to believe they could play a role in their students’ moral formation—and inappropriate to try.⁴ Rather, the belief was that students arrive at law school as fully formed moral beings. However, research has shown that individuals continue to develop in their moral formation throughout adulthood.⁵ You have a foundation, to be sure, and have faced some challenges. But your moral framework is not yet fully built. You will face many more challenges, both personal and professional, that will test that foundation and, possibly, reshape the framework.

Moreover, many attorneys view the practice of law as an amoral undertaking, one in which lawyers should not impose their own morality on

³ Or, more accurately, it was a return to an emphasis on professional formation. Professional formation was stressed in early legal education, then fell out of favor in the late 1800s with the move from a mentor/apprentice-based approach to legal education to the Langdellian Socratic-method approach. *See generally* Benjamin V. Madison III & Larry O. Natt Gantt II, *Morals and Mentors: What the First American Law Schools Can Teach Us About Developing Law Students’ Professional Identity*, 31 REGENT U. L. REV. 161 (2019).

⁴ *See* Jerome M. Organ, *Is There Sufficient Human Resource Capacity to Support Robust Professional Identity Formation Learning Outcomes?*, 14 U. ST. THOMAS. L.J. 458, 475 (2018); WILLIAM M. SULLIVAN ET AL., EDUCATION LAWYERS: PREPARATION FOR THE PROFESSION OF LAW 133–35 (2007).

⁵ *See, e.g.*, Neil Hamilton & Verna Monson, *Answering the Skeptics on Fostering Ethical Professional Formation (Professionalism)*, 20 PRO. LAW. 3 (2011) (citing the work of Professors Robert Kegan and Lisa Lahey); Cheryl Armon & Theo L. Dawson, *Developmental Trajectories in Moral Reasoning Across the Life Span*, 26 J. MORAL EDUC. 433, 447–49 (1997).

their clients. Make no mistake—the practice of law *is* a moral undertaking. In any client interaction, the lawyer, the client, and the “thick ideological community” of the profession itself each bring their morality to the table.⁶ Each can be ignored, but each will nonetheless affect the representation. You need not “step out of the lawyer’s role temporarily” to address moral aspects with a client.⁷ Rather, the moral components of practicing law are precisely what give it vitality, provide the most meaningful challenges, foster genuine client relationships, and lead to personal growth. Yes, practicing law on a purely technical level can be intellectually challenging and may seem “safer.” But grappling with the moral aspects beneath the surface can be transformative—for all involved. Pretending that law can be an amoral practice may be convenient, but it simply does not reflect reality.⁸

At St. Thomas, we have worked hard to make professional formation central to the curriculum.⁹ In this letter, I am not addressing the aspects of professionalism focused on client representation or your responsibilities to and as part of the bar.¹⁰ Rather, this letter is entirely self-focused: how do you find your place and role within this profession, how do you find meaning in your work over the years, and how do you reconcile your professional and personal identities? For instance, what does professional identity look like when you are choosing between job offers or balancing a job you feel called to against significant student debt? When the demands of the profession cause significant stress in your personal relationships? When you find yourself alone in your office while your family shares experiences without you? When you are nearing partnership and your firm advises you to stop doing pro bono work you care deeply about? When the work to which you’ve dedicated years of your life no longer fulfills you? These are the questions that have provided

⁶ Robert K. Vischer, *Legal Advice as Moral Perspective*, 19 GEO. J. LEGAL ETHICS 225, 230 (2006).

⁷ Robert K. Vischer, *How Should a Law School’s Religious Affiliation Matter in a Difficult Market?*, 48 U. TOL. L. REV. 307, 308 (2017).

⁸ This does not mean that every legal issue necessarily involves great moral questions or that you impose your morality on your client and dictate the path forward. Rather, it means that you are not afraid to raise the relevant moral issues when applicable. Listen to the client’s perspective, respectfully challenge your client when necessary, and then reach a conclusion and plan together. You may not change your client’s ultimate decision. Through that process, though, you will provide better representation, and the client just might challenge some of your own settled assumptions.

⁹ These efforts have been spearheaded by the leadership and innovative work of Professors Neil Hamilton and Jerry Organ and the Holloran Center for Ethical Leadership in the Professions.

¹⁰ “Professionalism” has many aspects, yet there is no consensus on what all it encompasses. For a great summary, and unification, of the various views, see Neil Hamilton, *Professionalism Clearly Defined*, 18 PRO. LAW. 4 (2008).

the most difficult, and sometimes painful, challenges to my own professional identity.

Unfortunately, these scenarios are impossible to simulate in a classroom; they require long-term, lived experience. The only way to truly know how such challenges will affect you, how you will respond, and how each may shape your professional identity is through experience. There is, however, one foundational aspect you likely have already started to wrestle with: the concept of your work as a calling.

DISCERNING YOUR CALLING

[L]et each person live the life the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him.

1 Corinthians 7:17.

The Apostle Paul seems to leave little room for ambiguity in his first letter to the Corinthians: each of us is uniquely called by God to a *particular* life. Depending on your beliefs, the source of the call may differ, but the feeling of a strong, perhaps inexplicable desire to move toward a particular action—one that may not be in your own material interests—I believe is a shared human experience.

The difficulty for most of us, however, is how to know what your calling is. Perhaps you are like I was as a law student: you *want* to feel called to a particular job or type of legal work, you've prayed about it, you envy those who are following their call, but you simply don't feel it. You may be excited about an opportunity, but is it what you are *supposed* to be doing? Is the work or job you are drawn to a calling, or are you simply rationalizing your own self-interests? For me, the sense that each person has a *particular* calling, and the fear that I might be missing mine, created significant anxiety. It also removed a sense of agency over my career and replaced it with the burden that I had to "get it right."

An even bigger challenge you may face, though, is whether you will be willing to take up that cross when you do feel called. Maybe you entered law school already feeling called to a specific aspect of the law. Now, after years of late nights, stress, hard work, and sacrifice, you have job options. Suddenly, that calling may not seem so clear. You may have trouble reconciling the job you feel called to against the debt you've accumulated and the higher salary of another option. Perhaps you begin to feel you *deserve* a higher paying, more "prestigious" job because of your hard work. Or maybe that job you felt called to is simply not an option at this time—a disorienting result when you feel you were meant for that work.

If any of these scenarios describes you, it's okay. Breathe deep. Relax. Remember this: when God calls you, He will do it on His timeline, not yours.

And if you ignore His call at first, *He won't give up on you*. Or if your calling comes from within, it will surface with more experience. You can't control that in the present.

Here is what you can control in the meantime: dive into the work you choose *as though* it is the work you were called to do. Commit to the work, challenge yourself, gain experience, sharpen your skills, and make an impact where you are. You will only be that much better prepared to answer the call when it comes. Perhaps an interim step (or many) will provide the platform you need when you are called; perhaps that is part of the plan.¹¹ As Steve Jobs once said, in life, you can only connect the dots backward.¹²

Your career will be long, and opportunities you cannot possibly predict will come your way. For now, work as though you were called to the job you have. But don't stop listening for the call. And once you hear it, whether today or twenty years from now, be bold and answer it. Few of us will have the courage to drop our nets immediately and answer it.¹³ It may take months, or even years, of discernment before you do. It will take courage, to be sure, and it will likely require sacrifice. You may ignore the call at first and rationalize it away. You may tell yourself that you will return to your calling later in life. You may convince yourself you have too many responsibilities, you don't have the choice or "luxury" of pursuing your calling. But just like the Rich Young Ruler,¹⁴ you do have a choice. You *always* have a choice. Will you choose comfort or impact?

But know that finding your calling does not mean your work will be easy. Keep this wisdom close to heart:

It is important not to be overly romantic about the notion of calling. It is no easy matter to cultivate a sense of calling when our days are a chaotic jumble of constant phone calls, impending deadlines, hurried research, endless meetings, and no-time-to-leave-your-desk lunches. Even if we do develop a sense of calling, it will not magically cause our problems to disappear.¹⁵

¹¹ For example, recall the story of Esther, who, despite initially hiding her Jewish identity to gain status and position with the king, then used her influence with the king to save her people. As Mordecai challenged her, "[W]ho knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" *Esther* 4:14.

¹² Steve Jobs, Commencement Address at Stanford University (June 12, 2005) (transcript and video available at <https://news.stanford.edu/2005/06/14/jobs>).

¹³ *Matthew* 4:18–22.

¹⁴ *Mark* 10:17–27.

¹⁵ JOSEPH G. ALLEGRETTI, *THE LAWYER'S CALLING: CHRISTIAN FAITH AND LEGAL PRACTICE* 35 (1996).

Indeed, as discussed next, it is not enough that you find work you are called to; *how* you do the work is just as important.

THE INHERENT VALUE OF WORK

So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Ecclesiastes 2:17.

Early in your career, you will grow weary of your work. Lawyering will be a grind at times. It doesn't matter whether you are at your dream job or a stepping stone, at a large firm, small firm, legal-aid clinic, in-house position, government agency, or elsewhere. The initial excitement will wear off. Some of your work will challenge you, but much of it will not. Your family will resent the long hours you must put in from time to time, yet those clients you do it for may not appreciate your time or sacrifices.

At first, you will justify the grind as a means to an end. I need to keep my eye on the big picture, you'll tell yourself. If I prove myself now, eventually I will get to do "real" work or have the "good" clients. You may focus on the long-term payoff or the perceived autonomy that comes with being a partner. You may assure yourself that you are getting through this now so you can have a bigger impact later. Such encouragement may sustain you for a short period of time, perhaps a few years.

But then you will realize those who are many years your senior still work as hard as you. And at that point, your obligations outside of work—your spouse, children, aging parents, civic roles—will become increasingly complex. You'll tell yourself you are doing all of this for your family. Yet, more and more, you may find yourself choosing work over family experiences—something you said you would *never* do. Indeed, "[w]ork can convince you that you are working hard for your family . . . while you are being seduced through ambition to neglect them."¹⁶ This dynamic can be particularly difficult when your colleagues consistently choose work over their family too. Together you begin to "normalize" it. You realize that, despite the firm's recruiting promises of a work-life balance, the work-first expectation is a silent but very real part of the firm culture. Eventually, you will reach a reckoning. You will question your place in the profession—perhaps even your calling to it at all.

I don't share this to sound negative, but to be candid. This dynamic certainly is not limited to lawyers, but it is particularly prevalent in our profession. And this dynamic is not limited to those at large firms. I saw it

¹⁶ TIMOTHY KELLER, EVERY GOOD ENDEAVOR 106 (2012).

play out again when I worked in-house at a corporation. I've talked with many friends and law school classmates who took different routes, who started off as public defenders, county attorneys, or lawyers at various sized firms. Most shared some version of this experience as well. Finding your place within the profession can be difficult and is rarely a straight line. But know, too, that most eventually found great satisfaction in and appreciation for their work.¹⁷

The secret to sustaining a satisfying career is not simply to find meaningful work and then to set such strong work-life boundaries that you'll never overwork yourself, never miss a family dinner or a Little League game. Many students have confidently told me that breaking a family commitment is a line they will never cross, damn the consequences. That is simply not realistic. As lawyers, we are entrusted with issues that are extremely important to our clients and that demand our best efforts. That is a great privilege. That makes the work rewarding. That is why we became lawyers. But it requires hard work and, sometimes, long hours. You cannot tell a client facing eviction that you aren't prepared for his hearing because you didn't want to miss your child's Little League game.

Rather, I encourage you to begin to view your work not as a means to an end but *as the end itself*. Let me be clear: the end cannot be *you*. It cannot be self-advancement, a certain income, a bonus, a promotion, prestige, recognition, or even supporting your family. Don't be mistaken, I hope these all come your way, and a certain level of security is essential to permit you to pursue your work. But if any of these is the end itself, your *reason* for working, it will never be enough. You'll find yourself constantly comparing yourself to others, chasing the wind.

If you doubt this, consider the outsized rates of depression, substance abuse, and divorce among lawyers and the prevailing economic model of private practice. At most firms, associate compensation and partnership consideration are based primarily on tenths-of-an-hour billed; your worth to the firm is literally measured in large part by how many six-minute increments you can accumulate each day, every day, year after year. Indeed, one firm I was at held a celebration for an associate who had *billed* three hundred hours in one month. While smaller firms may be somewhat more flexible regarding hours, they still focus primarily on each associate's progress in building his or her book of business. In either case, it is extremely hard for lawyers in private practice to avoid a constant focus on monetizing their time and, as a result, themselves. Yet "it is precisely the concentration

¹⁷ My own anecdotal observations are supported by Professor Jerry Organ's comprehensive review of various lawyer surveys. Jerome M. Organ, *What Do We Know About the Satisfaction/Dissatisfaction of Lawyers? A Meta-Analysis of Research on Lawyer Satisfaction and Well-Being*, 8 U. ST. THOMAS L.J. 225, 264 (2011).

upon economic security which makes both security and enjoyment in work unattainable, because it is a setting up of a means to an end as an end-in-itself, so that the true end and object of work itself is lost and forgotten.”¹⁸ Alternatively, lawyers in government, in-house, and legal-aid positions, who typically earn less than those in private practice but face less focus on billable hours or a book of business, consistently rate higher in career satisfaction.¹⁹

On the other hand, your end cannot be your selfless service to your clients. While this may sound more noble, it too is not sustainable. As Dorothy Sayers noted in her essay *Why Work?*, “[T]he moment you think of serving other people, you begin to have a notion that other people owe you something for your pains; you begin to think that you have a claim on the community. You will begin to . . . harbour a grievance if you are not appreciated.”²⁰ Indeed, perhaps the greatest dynamic behind burnout is a misplaced focus on the good one is trying to achieve rather than on the work needed to achieve it. Meaningful work absolutely should be a vehicle to love your neighbor and advance the common good. Sayers offers a more sustaining perspective, though: “It is the work that serves the community; the business of the worker is to serve the work.”²¹

Serve the work. While Catholic social teaching addresses this concept in detail, Pope John Paul II summed it up neatly: “[I]n the first place work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work.’”²² Work is an inherent piece of our humanity; God intended us to work, not because of the products or outcomes work creates, but because of the impact on the worker herself. Work *forms* you. Pope John Paul II further observed, “The basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.”²³ Indeed, if we can embrace work for the inherent value of the work itself, not primarily for the outcomes it produces—for ourselves or others—but as an important part of our own humanity, we can have a healthier, more sustaining relationship to work. The pinnacle of professional formation may be when your professional and personal identities do not conflict, simply coexist, or even complement each other, but when they meld together to deepen your own sense of your humanity.

In his tremendous book *Every Good Endeavor*, Timothy Keller discussed the concept of competent work as a form of prayer.²⁴ God made us

¹⁸ Dorothy L. Sayers, *Vocation in Work*, in *CALLINGS: TWENTY CENTURIES OF CHRISTIAN WISDOM ON VOCATION* 405, 407 (William C. Placher ed., 2005).

¹⁹ Organ, *supra* note 17, at 165.

²⁰ DOROTHY L. SAYERS, *Why Work?*, in *CREED OR CHAOS?* 46, 61 (1949).

²¹ *Id.* at 62.

²² POPE JOHN PAUL II, *ENCYCLICAL LETTER LABOREM EXERCENS* 9 (1981).

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ KELLER, *supra* note 16, at 77–81; *see also* Jose H. Gomez, *All You Who Labor: Towards*

to work, and work itself is a way to be in communion with God. Whatever work we may be doing, then, we have an obligation to pour ourselves into it and to do it well. Indeed, Dorothy Sayers observed, “No crooked table-legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter’s shop in Nazareth. . . . No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself.”²⁵ Even more to the point: “God is not served by technical incompetence.”²⁶ Work can be sanctifying, not because of *what* we are doing but because of *how* we go about it.

Serving yourself. Serving others. Both have a place, but too much of either can lead to an endless pursuit of affirmation, a “desperate thrust into work . . . in a full-tilt effort to make life fulfilling.”²⁷ By serving the work itself, work that is in line with your values and leverages your God-given strengths, you may experience the sustaining contentment of simply knowing you have done your work well. It’s that joy you feel when you lie down exhausted at the end of a hard but productive day. The work will not always be easy, it will not always be fun, but it can be satisfying and fulfilling.

Perhaps, in the end, God does not call us to a *particular* job as the Apostle Paul seemed to suggest. Maybe God simply calls us all to work. We then have the freedom to choose work consistent with our values and talents and to pour ourselves into that work. Indeed, Paul also instructed that “whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord.”²⁸ Or as Joseph Allegretti summed it up in *The Lawyer’s Calling*, “It’s not so important *what* you do for a living—it’s *how* you do it that makes the difference.”²⁹ Whether or not we are in a job we feel called to, we all can control *how* we do our work. And that will please God. That is liberating.

As I address next, though, beware of the temptation to use this concept as a free pass to pursue anything you desire, as a backdoor excuse to serve yourself.

a Spirituality of Work for the 21st Century, 20 NOTRE DAME J.L., ETHICS & PUB. POL’Y 791, 804–05 (2014).

²⁵ SAYERS, *supra* note 20, at 57–58.

²⁶ *Id.* at 60.

²⁷ KELLER, *supra* note 16, at 100.

²⁸ *Colossians* 3:23.

²⁹ ALLEGRETTI, *supra* note 15, at 28.

WHAT IS THE “RIGHT” WORK

[S]o I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground.

Matthew 25:25.

The greatest roadblock to ongoing growth and professional formation may be humankind’s limitless ability to rationalize and justify our behavior. In the St. Thomas course *Serving Clients Well*,³⁰ law students consider the difference between “high-road” integrity, in which your actions reflect your grounded values, and “low-road” integrity, in which your internal compass slowly bends to justify your actions.³¹ Over time, both constitute “integrity” in the sense that your actions and values align. The challenge, though, is honestly assessing which road you are on. Moreover, even the “high-road” can be a trap if you rigidly stick to a set of values without allowing room for the ongoing moral formation made possible through experience. Recognizing the difference between rationalization and honest assessment may be one of your greatest challenges over the years. It certainly has been one of mine.

I have watched many colleagues whom I greatly respect take actions inconsistent with their expressed beliefs, yet convince themselves otherwise. Nonetheless, after years of observing (and judging) this dissonance in others, I too fell into this trap. I left a job I loved when presented with an opportunity that promised greater wealth, comfort, and security. I don’t mean to suggest that these considerations are inherently wrong, but they became my end. When the opportunity arose, I recognized my temptations and initially resisted them. I gave myself time for discernment. I spent late nights reading books on work and vocation to help guide me. I discovered Timothy Keller and reread Dorothy Sayers. I read the papal encyclicals on work. But over time I began to rationalize my temptations. I convinced myself that by simply doing whatever work I chose well, I could still advance the common good. In fact, maybe I could do *even more* good from this new opportunity. Maybe I was being *called* to this new opportunity to do just that.

Ultimately, I took the job but quickly found myself unsettled. I realized that I would not, in fact, be doing “more good.” The work was challenging, yet I struggled to find meaning in it. I had achieved a new level of outward “success,” but I did not feel successful inside. I went back again

³⁰ All first-year students at the University of St. Thomas School of Law take a two-part Foundations of Justice class. The first part, titled “Moral Reasoning for Lawyers,” is a week-long study before their first semester of law school. The second part, titled “Serving Clients Well,” is a week-long study before the second semester that picks up on the themes from the first part and examines how they apply in the day-to-day, year-to-year practice of law.

³¹ David Luban, *Integrity: Its Causes and Cures*, 72 *FORDHAM L. REV.* 279, 279–80 (2003).

to Keller and Sayers but now read them in a new light. I recognized that I had taken from them what I needed to justify my decision, but they were never *just* about the how. They were quite clear that the how must be married to a greater purpose beyond myself.

Perhaps due to the recognition of my own failing, I became deeply inspired around this time by the examples of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Oscar Romero, both of whom struggled to reconcile their faith and actions but ultimately chose lives of impact and meaning over comfort (and ultimately died for their decisions).³² While I could never be a Bonhoeffer or Romero, I felt way too close to the third servant in Matthew. I knew, deep down, that I was burying my talents in return for safety and comfort. And I knew that when my work is one day through, I would regret it. And so—eventually—I walked away. But, as difficult as the experience was, I walked away with a deeper understanding of myself that only experience can truly provide.

Catholic social teaching warns against establishing a value hierarchy for work, but it also clarifies that “[t]his does not mean that, from the objective point of view, human work cannot and must not be rated and qualified in any way.”³³ For most younger lawyers, the rating system is based on the size of the deal, the size of the client, the name on the letterhead, and the size of the salary or bonus. You may see these as proxies for your abilities, even your own worth. Indeed, law school itself tends to reinforce that view.³⁴

But to those who have worked for years in the profession, the firm, the salary, or the client base means almost nothing. If you are competent, work hard for your clients, treat your colleagues and adversaries with respect, and bring your moral perspective to your work (while leaving room for others’ moral perspectives as well), you will be highly regarded by those inside and outside the profession. It makes no difference whether you are at a large firm, are a solo practitioner, work for a corporation, or serve the indigent.

Rather, I propose that your rating system be completely unique to yourself. Specifically, do not seek work because it is the highest paying or most “prestigious.” Seek work that provides adequately for your family but also (1) leverages *your* individual strengths, (2) is consistent with *your* moral foundation, (3) will challenge you (from time to time), and (4) allows you agency over your work. Work that meets all these criteria may not be possible right out of law school; you may need a few steps to get there. But such work,

³² For more information on each, I highly recommend ERIC METAXAS, *BONHOEFFER: PASTOR, MARTYR, PROPHET, SPY* (2011) and the film *ROMERO* (Paulist Pictures 1989).

³³ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *supra* note 22, at 9.

³⁴ See Jerry Organ, *From Those to Whom Much Has Been Given, Much Is Expected: Vocation, Catholic Social Teaching, and the Culture of a Catholic Law School*, 1 J. CATH. SOC. THOUGHT 361, 383–88 (2004).

when you find it, will bring out your best attributes. It will be meaningful and sustaining. It will permit your professional identity to align fully with your personal identity. You will have true integrity; you will not have to convince yourself of that on your drive home each evening.

Beyond these criteria, I would never tell any student what job, firm, or area of work he or she should pursue, or that a particular area of the law or set of clients has more inherent value than another. Our profession, including our law schools, often sets up big firms as the ideal but then villainizes them. Both characterizations are greatly overstated. Great, meaningful, and fulfilling work can be done at large firms. But work every bit as meaningful and fulfilling can be done at small firms, in government positions, at legal-aid organizations, and in-house. Ultimately, all areas of the law and all clients need good lawyers. Where you fit in, what need you fill, requires your own discernment.

As you discern, though, keep three things in mind. First, don't confuse your talents for your strengths. A talent is merely something you are good at. A strength requires competence, for sure, but is something that is *meaningful* to you. No matter how gifted you may be at math, a career in physics will not be satisfying if you don't enjoy math; that talent is not a career strength. Likewise, just because you may have experience in a particular area of the law or may be skilled at a particular aspect of practice, don't limit yourself to that if you feel called elsewhere. Over the long term, conviction and dedication will trump bare skill every time.

Second, do not conflate size with impact. Years into practice, I realized the larger the project I worked on, the more transactional the relationship between myself and the client often became. Some of my most rewarding experiences as a lawyer have been with my "smaller" clients, whose issues are every bit as important to them. One of the great privileges of being a lawyer is that you can truly impact people's lives. Your greatest impacts will often have nothing to do with the size or complexity of the deal.

Finally, the further you progress down a road, the harder it becomes to change directions. But it is not impossible. Maybe you will be one of the fortunate few who find and pursue their calling right away. More likely, though, you will start down another path before that sense of justice you started law school with, which may lie dormant in the crush of building your career, starts knocking again. Don't deceive yourself that you are too important to your current clients or firm to answer that call. As great as you may be at your work, there will be hundreds of lawyers who can, and will, step into your shoes. Instead, ask yourself how many lawyers in your position would have the courage to step away and pursue something new—to use the skills and experiences they've worked so hard to acquire in a way they find more meaningful, to have an even greater impact? You may be one of many

great lawyers if you stay where you are. But you may be truly exceptional if you follow that call.³⁵

LIMITATIONS OF WORK

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works.

Ephesians 2:8–9.

No matter what work you choose, no matter how great you become at it, your work will not fully define you. Just as the person you are is so much more than your law school grades, you too will be so much more than your work. Beware of looking to that “desperate thrust into work” to give your life meaning.³⁶ When you feel that temptation creeping in, be honest with yourself, be vulnerable, and seek counsel from both professional mentors and those who know you fully apart from your work. Then give yourself time to process your reactions and emotions.

I certainly have made choices that, in hindsight, I would not make again. But that is the luxury of hindsight. I made each choice with the best information available to me at that point in time and the benefit, and limitations, of my own set of experiences. And, importantly, each of those choices has, in its own way, shaped who I am today. I would not be the teacher I am if I had not practiced for many years under challenging circumstances and pressures. I would not have the same appreciation for the work I do if I had not experienced the dissonance I felt in a job that was financially rewarding but personally unfulfilling. At each step I gained mentors and made friends who I value greatly today. Each step unmasked and forced me to confront certain of my weaknesses, yet tested and reinforced other strengths. In sum, each was a critical step in my ongoing professional formation. Twenty years into my career the process continues—and I am grateful for that.

You too will make many choices in your careers, some you may regret. Permit yourself some steps along the way—even a wrong turn or two. Learn from each. Be honest with yourself about your motivations, about your rationalizations. *But give yourself some grace.* Embrace the tension you feel from time to time not as a signal that you are doing something wrong but as one that you are doing something *right*—that you are still growing personally

³⁵ A great book about reevaluating your career years into it is BOB BUFORD, *HALFTIME: MOVING FROM SUCCESS TO SIGNIFICANCE* (1997).

³⁶ KELLER, *supra* note 16, at 100.

and professionally, still challenging yourself, still resisting the pull to low-road integrity and striving to take the high-road. Whatever work you choose, commit to it, but be open to the possibility of another way. You'll have a long career with many opportunities to fine-tune, or even completely change, its direction. Professional formation can be a messy process, and that's okay. Eventually, you will know whether you are doing the right work for you. And if you are not, how will you respond?

Most importantly, though, always remind yourself that you will not earn salvation through your work. That price has been paid. Rather, think of work as an invitation to engage with God and, in your own small corner, continue His work. Whatever the setting you choose for that, what an incredible opportunity that is. If you commit yourself fully to that work, you cannot go wrong.