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## THE SIDE EFFECTS OF PRACTICING LAW: ANGER, GRIEVANCE AND SUFFERING

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The combative nature of the practice of law exposes you daily to the world of anger and grievance. If you can remain detached, conducting yourself professionally, you can do great work. Yet, you may find yourself experiencing the negative emotions that arise from your work environment. For your own sake and that of your clients and colleagues, family and friends, you must understand the nature of anger and grievance in order to avoid and release it.

Anger arises from a perception of interference with something that you are doing, feeling or expecting. There is a frustration. Something happened that you did not intend to happen or something did not happen, which you had intended to occur. There are times when anger has its place. But the situations in which it is warranted are few. Anger rarely resolves the problem that initiated the emotion. Anger often leads to an inappropriate response to the triggering event. And, if anger becomes habitual, it presents not only long-term problems for your happiness, but for your physical health.

A grievance arises from anger that has not been released. There has been an interference to which you could not appropriately respond. You may have lacked the skills. It may have been entirely beyond your control. But the event and its emotions linger. Sometimes you even lose track of the particulars of the event. You simply swim in its residual emotional soup. You think about it too much. In the words of Fred Luskin, co-founder and director of the Stanford University Forgiveness Project and author of *“Forgive for Good - A Proven Prescription for Health and Happiness,”* you let the grievance rent too much space in your mind.

Grievances can become a part of your narrative, the story you tell about yourself that shapes your habitual reactions as well as your beliefs and judgments about the world. They reinforce your self-image. Bad things happen to you because you are too tall, too short, too heavy, too thin, too light skinned, too dark, too Jewish, too Christian. You know why. You have come to expect them.

Grievances cause suffering. It is best to relieve yourself of grievances sooner than later. Relief of your suffering should be reason enough. But there is more. The attention that you pay to your grievances makes them stronger over time. Grievance making can become habit, making it likely that future interference also gives rise to grievance. Finally, grievance grants the offender power over you.

Do you know if you have a grievance? Is there an upset, recent or historical, about which you think or talk about repeatedly? Do you dwell on that upset many times a day? Do you think about that upset more than you think about things that are good in your life? When you consider this upset, do you become physically uncomfortable or emotionally upset? Do you find yourself telling the story of what happened again and again in your mind or to others? Could a close friend repeat the story for you? If the answer to three or more of the above is yes, you are carrying a grievance. Consider how much of your life is being given over to the past and how much of your present you are losing as a consequence.

According to Luskin, three core components give rise to grievances: an exaggerated feeling of personal offense; blaming the offender for how you feel; and creation of the grievance story. These components can keep hurt alive indefinitely.



**Timothy A. Tosta**

Partner

415.356.4623

ttosta@luce.com

[www.luce.com/timothytosta](http://www.luce.com/timothytosta)

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When something negative occurs to you, through the action of another, you must examine whether or not the transgression was personal. Many things happen to us at the hands of others that are entirely unintentional. They may have arisen out of negligence, inattentiveness or stupidity, but the actor had no intention of causing you harm. If no harm was intended and you just happened to be at the wrong place, at the wrong time, what is the point of taking it personally? Does it make the harm go away? It does not mean that you have to like the transgression. Nor does it mean that you should deny its impact. But, if you can get outside of your narrative, you can begin to distinguish between those aspects of an event that are personal from those that are not.

Blame is the second step in the grievance process. When adversity strikes, your first reaction is to look for a cause. Then, you fix blame. Whose fault was this? Depending on your narrative, almost irrespective of the circumstance, you have a preference for either blaming others (an individual, a group, your parents, your God or the universe) or yourself. Blame is a hypothesis, not a fact. It is supposed to make things better, but does not. Blame seeks to create a story, by linking to similar past events, which serve to confirm your existing worldview.

Blame, however, does not promote healing. It only sustains suffering. When you blame, you allow your emotions to block your ability to clearly see what is going on. Blame allows you to sustain your misperceptions indefinitely.

The most insidious effect of blame is that cedes someone else power over you. As you blame, you become a victim. You tie yourself emotionally to the person you blame. Consequently, you will need action from others to release its hold. This victimization keeps you in the past, depletes your energy, impairs your health and causes you suffering. None of this is to suggest that you do not hold people accountable for their actions when such actions have caused you harm. But, accountability is not blame. Blame is emotional.

Last is the creation of a grievance story. Remarkably, describing the adverse event is only of secondary importance. The primary purpose of a grievance story is to put the experience into a personal context. Because you live inside your narrative, your memories, expectations, beliefs and judgments, will shape the story for you. The story you first tell then will determine how you remember the event and calculate its significance.

How do you know when you are telling a grievance story? Here are some clues: Have you told your story more than once to the same person? Does telling the story agitate you? Does this story remind you of other painful events? Is there a villain in your story? Is the villain the central character? Do you have fantasy conversations with your central character? Is this story about your pain and loss? Can you not help but tell your story to friends and acquaintances, even strangers? Have you ever checked your story's details for accuracy? If you are coming up with a lot of yes answers, you are probably telling a grievance story. Notice that in telling your grievance story, you repeatedly subject yourself and others to your pain and suffering.

In the end, Luskin notes grievances arise from trying to enforce unenforceable rules. You create an unenforceable rule so that you can write a mental ticket to punish the perceived wrongdoer. An unenforceable rule might be: "He should love me like I love him" or "She should come home directly after work to be with me." It is unenforceable because you don't have ultimate power to affect the outcome. But, since the rule is unenforceable, the only person you end up hurting is yourself. Unenforceable rules evoke anger, helplessness, depression, and frustration. The more unenforceable rules you have, the worse it gets. Living in the world of unenforceable rules impairs your judgment and leads to further suffering.

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With awareness, you can begin to identify when you are evoking unenforceable rules. Simple recognition is a powerful first step. Constructing only those rules, which you can enforce, is next. Know the limits of your ability to influence outcomes. Make only realistic “bite sized” rules. Regain your power by discarding unenforceable rules as you observe their appearance. Control is often illusory. Fewer rules, fewer grievances. You lighten your load. You discover renewed energy. And, you become ready to forgive.

*Timothy Tosta is a partner with Luce Forward's San Francisco office, specializing in land use law. He blogs at [www.coachingcounsel.com/blog](http://www.coachingcounsel.com/blog). He can be contacted at 415.356.4612 or [ttosta@luce.com](mailto:ttosta@luce.com).*

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