

Two Practices, One Life: Why Your Life Outside The Law Matters

By [RICHARD RUSSETH](#)

My practice is important to me. I am up just about everyday at 5 AM working to build that practice. Get better at it. Take it further. It's a solo practice in case you were wondering. No partners – and I like it that way. Yes, I practice yoga for a solid hour every morning, rain or shine, barring the usual scheduling problems of life.

You don't need to practice yoga – that's not the point of this blog post. But if you practice law (and if you are reading this...), you need a counterforce, an antidote, a release valve. You need some time every day that has nothing to do with law.

Some might say you need balance.

But balance is an overused term in my view, and I think it is impossible to achieve true balance if you have the drive and desire to be the best at what you do. It's hard to be "best" and "balanced" at the same time, unless you are striving to be the best at balance. But you are a lawyer, so I'm guessing that's not your ambition, right?

Its not balance you need but an *antidote*. The hours, the stress, the competition, the constant demands by everyone that you meet their needs, and the inescapable sense that too much hangs in the balance too often can make the practice of law physically, emotionally and spiritually crushing – if you let it. And it is a choice, believe it or not.

You can choose to be crushed by the overwhelming demands of the law or you can decide to take care of yourself (your senior partner won't) and develop your antidote - your life outside your legal practice.

In athletic activities, cross-training has become a standard way of preventing injuries, burnout, and also increasing success. You need to cross-train for the law for the very same reasons. *You can't really be the best at what you do if that is all you do*. Cross-training for the law means doing things that are as far away from the office, the courthouse and pro bono as possible. Sort of like weight lifting is for runners. For me this means a *non-competitive* activity that forces me to *focus on that activity* rather than ruminate on my latest challenging contract negotiation.

Lots of lawyers I know, run. I like to run too but running still lets me think about the law – it's a problem solving tool since I actually can obsess on my client's latest issue as the miles roll by. And since I can and do think about the law when I run, its not focused enough. Its not true cross-training. Plus its sort of competitive for me – on the running trail I always want to catch the person in front of me...

Enter yoga.

You can't practice yoga and think about the law or anything outside the very practice you are engaged in – you will tip over in any yoga pose (asana) involving balance if you are not totally focused. Believe me, I fell over a lot when I first started practicing yoga. It's not competitive either – unless you are in a class, where it's easy to make it competitive – which is why I like to practice in the morning and at home most of the time. It's just you, your yoga mat and the sunrise.

For me, yoga is an antidote, an immunization and a shot of Red Bull® all in one. An antidote because when I am stressed, the flow and focus of yoga relaxes my body and takes my mind off the law, an immunization shot because the practice helps me build physical and emotional strength, endurance and discipline so that I am less stressed to begin with on a day to day basis and find I can more easily recover from stress, and it's a Red Bull® because I emerge from my daily morning practice with more energy and drive than I started with. And, last but not least, if you practice routinely, you'll look great as you lose weight and tone every muscle in your body! Less stressed, stronger and looking great. It's a three for one deal – and for any lawyer who's short on time (all of us?), that's great deal. Plus it improves my running so I can catch you when you pass me on the trail...

So what's your antidote? Everyone is different; everyone will have a different answer to that question. The important thing is to have an answer, because if you don't have an antidote, than the law, as remarkable, wonderful and rewarding a profession as it is, will likely be very, very tough on you.

It's pretty common knowledge that depression occurs four times more often with lawyers than any other profession. According to an ABA study, stress is so high in the profession that it actually impairs the ability of 20-25% of all lawyers to practice effectively. Alcoholism among lawyers (13%) is twice the average in the general US population.

In yoga, one of the key ethical principles is *ahimsa*, which calls for non-violence towards all living things. And the first place you must apply this ethical tenet is to yourself! A depressed, stressed out lawyer isn't doing her clients any favors, isn't doing his family any favors, isn't doing her firm any favors - isn't doing himself or those around him, anything but harm.

The antidotes are as diverse as people who practice law. I know a fellow who, with his wife, has taken up salsa (the dance not the condiment), another who is a back country skier in Colorado, another who is an ultramarathoner, another is a chess master, another is a history buff and another who writes poetry (OK, that's me) and the list could go on and on. The point being that my antidote is just that, mine. My rules of 1) noncompetitive and 2) highly focused are also just mine. Your antidote will no doubt be different.

Don't let yourself become a statistic. Find your antidote.

It's a matter of life.

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