The Three Main Fears That Keep You From Leaving The Practice Of Law

You are afraid of the "unknown" of what actual jobs you, an attorney, could be qualified for beyond just litigation and transactional work.

By CASEY BERMAN on December 15, 2017 at 7:34 AM

So many of us attorneys do not like the practice of law. You suffer under the anxiety and boredom and repetition and isolation and stress of being a lawyer.

But you still don't leave the practice behind. You don't make that career shift. You don't change your life for the better.

It's mainly because of the crippling fears that keeps you locked in a paralyzing figure 8 cycle of hating your current lawyer job, but not moving to something new because of your overwhelming fear of the unknown and erroneous belief that you cannot do anything else but be a lawyer.

You are afraid. So you wait. You procrastinate. You delay. Even though you cannot ignore the burning desire to leave the law and do something else.

I know that fear very well. It crippled me until I finally left the law behind in July 2004.

Below are the three main ways these fears manifest themselves, with some ideas on how to overcome them:
Fear #1 Fear of making less money and capping our lifetime earning potential

Most of your fear that keeps you from leaving the law revolve around money.

You are afraid of the "unknown" of what actual jobs you, an attorney, could be qualified for beyond just Litigation and Transactional work.

You may feel your lifetime earning potential could be "capped" in some way. You can estimate what you can make at the firm if you stay for the next 20-30 years. But you don’t have this same foresight into "non-law" salaries ... you actually may have this preconceived notion that you’ll make far less if you leave the law.

And this leads you to think that a alternative job salary will not let you keep up the same lifestyle you’re used to ... which makes you very scared that you won’t be able to save for retirement, you won’t be able to afford your kids’ college education, and that you’ll be buried in student loan debt forever.

That’s the spiral of financial fear we take ourselves down.

It’s understandable. Money is a sensitive topic for all of us, and one the world at large worries about.

Here are some ways to get over this money fear and get moving on leaving the law: First off, the goal of leaving the law is not to put you in financial jeopardy. You can go through the process of exploring and leaving the law in parallel with keeping your current attorney day job. Sure, you’re busy with your lawyer work, but when that desire to leave outweighs your excuses to procrastinate, you can carve out the time each week, and within a few months, you’ll have momentum leading you to a new life. I’ve seen it happen time and time again with my clients.

Second, remember that there are so many creative, flexible, lucrative ways to make money beyond just the billable hour: Salary, bonuses, commission, joint ventures, licensing, equity, profit sharing and on and on.

And third, we like to think we lawyers make a ton of money, but the salaries in the "non-law" world are actually very good. According to a 2014 National Association for Law Placement study, half of US lawyers are now starting at a salary of around $62,000 a year. Even BigLaw salaries aren’t trending as high as they once were. And once you get out there, you’ll see the multitude of “non-law” jobs that your skill sets are a fit for (like marketing directors, management consultants, head of operations, head of logistics, project managers, corporate trainers, business development) all can make well into six figures.

There is an abundant life waiting for you once you decide to leave the law. Do not let a perceived lack of money get in your way to create a great life for yourself.

Fear #2 – Fear of the the risk of the unknown + the fear of uncertainty

This is a general fear of what you don’t know. The fear of what you cannot control. The fear that if you leave the law, you can’t be sure about anything at all.

We’re afraid of what we don’t know. Even just thinking of leaving the law takes us to a territory we have heard about, but never experienced before.

If you will, it’s the fear of the boogeyman ... and a lot of it is tied to what we just discussed about money.

To put this in graphic, exaggerated terms, this is the fear which every person on this earth holds ... the fear of ... yes ... death. And for you as an attorney, it spirals out something like:
The Three Main Fears That Keep You From Leaving The Practice Of Law

If I leave the law for a non-law job, I fear I won't be good at it, and I'll then get fired by this job and I'll then be a source of social disapproval and mockery and then my spouse will leave me and take the kids, and my family life will fall apart and I'll then lose my house and I'll end up in a cardboard box on the street and I'll die alone, cold, miserable and forgotten.

I've gone through this same (somewhat exaggerated) hypothetical at my live events and with clients, and everyone, myself included, all sort of sheepishly nod our heads to this: Yup, when I am at my most fearful, this is what I fear as the worst.

The way to get over this fear is to not double down and try even harder to predict the future as perfectly as possible (even though that is our attorney instinct). No, that will just leave you further in doubt as to what to do.

The way to overcome this fear is to know that you are supported. As you take those baby steps to leave the law (to identify and isolate these fears, to really audit and come to terms with what professional skills you are good at, and then getting out there and creating opportunities), you'll connect with friends and family, people in your network, and new contacts.

While some friends and family may dissuade you (see the Third Fear, below), many will be supportive of your plan to leave the law.

They will introduce you to other people in the alternative career world, who can serve as sounding boards and introduce you to yet more people who may be hiring, or know someone who is.

Little by little, opportunities will come to you. You cannot map out and guarantee the future from where you are now. It remains unknown. I mean … it is the future.

But you can find the support and guidance to help you incrementally craft the future into a present that you like.

Let me use a fable to better describe this fear of the unknown:

Years ago, a thief was to be punished in the palace in front of the king. The king offered the thief a choice for his punishment: hanged on the gallows in front of him, or made subject to whatever was behind the large wooden door down the hall. The thief thought about it, and going with what he knew, chose the gallows. As the henchman placed the noose around the thief's neck, the thief asked the king what was behind the large wooden door down the hall. He was going to be hanged, he wouldn't tell anyone. The king thought for a second and then motioned to his attendant, who pushed on the large wooden door, which opened to a path leading through a grassy field to the edge of town. “Your freedom,” the king answered. “But you were too afraid of the unknown to ever consider it as an option”

Fear #3 – Fear of disappointing our friends and family

This third fear holds so many of us back, and is so loaded with emotion and family dynamics and guilt and power struggles that it can often be the most difficult to unwind.

This is the big fear that if you leave the law, you will risk being subject to social and familial disapproval.

I am afraid I won't please everyone in my life I'm used to pleasing.

I'm afraid of disappointing my mom and dad.

I'm afraid of my attorney friends mocking and abandoning me.

I'm afraid of making people I care about mad.

I am afraid that if I leave the law, I will disappoint those close to me and whom I care about.

I'm afraid that if I leave the law, all this work and time and money and effort to be an attorney will have been wasted.

Here's how you can overcome this fear, and build up the courage to talk with those close to you as you explore leaving the law:

First off, realize that your life is waiting to be yours again. By going to law school and becoming a lawyer likely for many not-so-competely-right-and-authentic-and-critically-thought-through-reasons, you have correspondingly built a life that is out of touch from your skills, your enjoyments, your talents, your desires. You have been living a life that has felt like it wasn't really yours. Once you begin to explore the skills and strengths you are really good at (what I call your Unique Genius) and truly understand what you want and what comes naturally to you, then you can begin to set a course directly by you and specifically for you.

Second, as you research new "non-law" jobs, and as you assess your own skills and strengths, you can more clearly show them that you aren't reaching your full potential as a lawyer, and that your skills and strengths are likely better utilized in another role and career.

And third, you can show them how in some alternative roles, you can actually make more money and create as much of or even more of a stable and secure, while also fulfilling and exciting career. As mentioned above, many non-law roles that your skill set can be a fit with reach the six figure salary range.

When you leave the law and land that "non-law" job that you are confident in, that enables you to help others, you can become happy ... not necessarily because it feels good to work in this new job, but because you also now are strong enough to work through and embrace the fear and stress and pain it takes to become who you truly need to be.

To paraphrase the famous quote, the best time to change yourself for the better was a year ago. The second best time is now.

Casey Berman (University of California, Hastings '99), is the founder of Leave Law Behind, a consulting practice that helps unhappy attorneys leave the law for alternative careers. Casey focused primarily on software licensing for five years before leaving the law behind in 2004. Since then, his career has helped him develop a wide range of skills, as Management Consultant, VP Operations, Chief Communications Officer and Investment Banker.