



Pandora's Box

Cramming down the demons that drive us differs from confronting them



Cooper

BY MILES B. COOPER

There was a person who was married with two lovely children. The person was a successful professional, and a functional alcoholic. That worked, until it didn't. The person's spouse loved that alcoholic very much, and tried everything to help right the ship. But only the alcoholic had the power to change, and things kept going downhill. It reached the point where the alcoholic couldn't be in the house. The alcoholic moved into a hotel. The location was intentional – along the route the children walked to school. The alcoholic picked the spot to see the kids twice a day, without them knowing, hoping this would inspire change. The alcoholic's spouse, who never stopped loving the alcoholic, checked in regularly. One day, there was no response. That happened sometimes. But a day turned into a couple... When the spouse went to the hotel and asked to check on the alcoholic, they went to the room. They found a corpse. The alcoholic successfully drowned the demons. The children lost a parent and the alcoholic lost any opportunity to turn a promising life around.

Snap back to reality

Those who regularly read this column know the story framing the learning is usually my own personal experience. That's not true here. I am not writing from beyond the grave. I heard this story five years ago from the spouse, my client, when I flew out to meet with her before her deposition in a case totally unrelated to her first husband's struggles. What she did not know was that my own dances with the bottle – what I had thought of as part of the work hard, play hard trial lawyer mystique – had grown more frequent and less controlled. A few days before I met with her, I had a heavy night. I was deep in self-loathing over that recent bender. Her story, heard in that state, resonated. I love my wife and love our children. I did not want to lose them, nor lose myself. It was time. I flew back, made a call to The Other Bar, and haven't had a drink since.

Cramming down the demons

I knew that to be successful in recovery, I had to find a healthy alternative to the booze. I already loved riding bicycles. When I quit drinking, whenever I had that desire to alter myself, I went for a ride. Boy, did I get strong that first year. Mile after hammering mile, I crammed those demons down. While sober, I failed to recognize the demons still drove me, just in a less destructive direction.

Learning through adversity

We lawyers work in an incredibly stressful profession, in an incredibly stressful time. According to various sources,

alcoholism impacts 20-30% of lawyers, higher in the litigation world. That doesn't account for other addictions. Those can take many forms – drugs, overeating, obsessive exercise, overworking ... you name it. Anything to sate the internal demons who ego-bait us.

Very few take the time to step back, evaluate, and confront the demons. We're damn busy, right? Confronting demons takes time, and it is hard. Many of us avoid these confrontations until there's no alternative. Bottoming out as an alcoholic is one way. But even then, I managed to cram instead of confront until our then-three-year-old daughter nearly died from cancer. She's now six and doing very well, but the therapy I sought for the resulting PTSD was where I finally opened Pandora's Box. There were a lot of what seemed like very scary banshees and djinns there. By confronting them, the demons and I met and grokked in fullness. There's a child's book where the child, frightened by a monster in the basement, finds that confronting the monster takes away its power. The monster shrinks and is no longer frightening.

Therapy worked for me. Meditation works for many others. Michael Pollan's new book suggests a Red Adair-like counterintuitive approach involving therapeutic psychedelics. There are many options for engaging the demons. Whatever path works is right. Not everyone has as many demons, but face it: if you were driven enough to litigate, there's a good chance you've got some. Does this take time? Absolutely. But far less time than it will shave off your life if you just keep cramming them down.

Outro

I've come to love my demons. They helped form me. Because I confront them, they no longer terrify me. They snarl sometimes, and I listen and adjust. Am I perfect and perfectly at peace in all things? No. Every day as a Jedi lawyer, I journey along that asymptotic path toward grace. When I misstep, as sometimes happens, I do not beat myself up. Instead, I try to learn from what happened so I can improve. We are all works in progress, hopefully striving to become our best in an era that calls for Jedi lawyers more than any other time in recent memory...

Miles B. Cooper is a partner at Emison Cooper & Cooper LLP. He represents people with personal injury and wrongful death cases. In addition to litigating his own cases, he associates in as trial counsel and consults on trial matters. He has served as lead counsel, co-counsel, second seat, and schlepper over his career, and is a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates. Cooper's interests beyond litigation include trial presentation technologies and bicycling (although not at the same time).

