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Evolving gnosis

Wisdom gathered over the last few decades' practice (and with a few to go)


Cooper

By Miles B. Cooper

"Okay, Boomer," said the lawyer's 11-year-old daughter with a twinkle in her eye. The lawyer frowned. While the lawyer could be, and sometimes was, mistaken for a Boomer, that was the mileage and not the age. Apparently, the finer parenting points the lawyer was attempting to convey were less interesting than the lawyer thought…

Father knows best

There's a danger to a column like this. Without proper introduction, it could take on an unintentionally patronizing tone. That's not the intent. My goal? Sharing wisdom that's influenced me with 25 years in practice behind me. I've benefitted from great mentors and partners, had good fortune and bad, battled addiction and nearly lost that daughter mentioned above to cancer, doing a metric ton of self-work along the way. With luck, I have at least another 25 good years ahead. Every day becomes another opportunity to learn, iterate, and refine that wisdom. Some learning is in tension, forming both yin and yang. Finding the right way to embrace both creates stretch opportunities.

Know yourself

This is a lifelong endeavor. To know, love, and help others one must first know and love oneself. A good initial step, if one has not already done so, is to determine one's own driving values. There are a multitude of exercises out there to help one triangulate these. As an example, my personal values are wisdom, challenge, growth, and joy. An aside: One of my joys is working (and riding) with folks across a diverse age spectrum; these relationships drive plasticity through learning from the young and old. These values then become a frame for work, focus, and decisions. Journal, reflect, read, and recognize that self as a constantly evolving being. A corollary to this is forgiving oneself. We all make mistakes, missteps, and misspeak. These are learning moments. Apologize, make amends to the best of one's ability, and in doing so forgive oneself and let it go.
A companion to knowing oneself is establishing routines that provide good energy and bones for self-awareness. The tension here is making sure a mindless devotion to routine does not become overwhelming.

Do less, well

Litigation life quickly becomes all-consuming. Add on the plaintiff lawyer mindset ("Yes, I'll help you with that"), a family, firm obligations, maintaining fitness, a hobby or three and suddenly there are 300 activity hours crammed into a 268-hour week. What's harder than building a practice? Subtracting to just essential efforts. Recognize that an overfull mind means insufficient processing power to meaningfully strategize, think, and do deep work. A corollary? Create windows for that deep work. This means shutting off all access. No email, no texts, no phones. Just focus. The world will not end when one disconnects. The tension? Focusing on the essentials generates success. Success creates more demand for one's time. Learn to politely say no by acknowledging one cannot take on the requested task and do a good job with what one is already doing.

For me, there is no work/life balance. Just balance. Sometimes, like the lead-up to trial and trial itself, the work becomes everything. Others, like pediatric cancer, life becomes everything (dual meaning here intended). We didn't pick 9-5 jobs. Become comfortable with a balanced fluidity, including being out of balance at points. Balance will return. That return usually requires a pendulum swing in the other direction. Take some quiet, calm, or retreat to restore energy and return fully fueled to the fight.

Along with balancing imbalance, tap into life's ebb and flow. Surf the sets. The universe creates patterns and energy. There will be times when momentum grabs us – everything around pops off. That's go time. Use that energy to make effortless forward motion. Then there are periods when the momentum not only dies, but it feels like one's fighting the sea just to stay in place. Fighting wastes energy. Surrender, reflect, retool, and rest. That momentum will return, and with rest, one will be ready.

Social studies

With momentum's ebb and flow the ego side can find oneself making comparisons to others. Don't. It only brings misery. There will always be those more and less successful, regardless of how one defines success. The tension: without making deleterious comparisons, pick skilled adversaries. Greatness comes through challenge. Whether competing for business or competing in the courtroom, competition with talented opponents raises the bar.

Along the way, develop and maintain some deep friendships. Arthur Brooks talks about deal friends and real friends in his must-read *From Strength to Strength*. Real friends transform the quality of one's life. Maintaining deep friendships with a busy practice and family can be very hard. Making the regular effort to keep that friendship flywheel spinning makes the later decades worth living, and far less lonely.

Outro

Back to our lawyer walking hand in hand with a healthy 11-year-old daughter. For every piece of wisdom the (not) Boomer lawyer has imparted to her, the lawyer has learned tenfold back. Stay tuned for the wisdom update column, due in 25 years in the May 2050 issue…

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