

Celebrating the Seasons of Our Life: A Lawyer's Spring

Part 1 of a 4 part series on the seasons of our lives as lawyers

by Susan Ann Koenig

Perhaps it's because I was admitted to the bar over 30 years ago. Or because I am in the second half of my life. Or that I was widowed last year. Whatever the reason, I am acutely aware of the power of appreciating each season of one's life.

When we start our career, we want to be further along and when we near the end of our career we long for the good old days. Learning to surrender to each season of our life does not always come naturally.

When I get clear about the time of my life that I am in, I am better able to bring myself present to its gifts and to know where to focus my time, energy and attention. When I forget where I am now, I struggle more and create frustration because of my own expectations.

The spring of the lawyer's life, our energy is high and strong, but our roots are not yet well established. We are still fragile, but so eager to grow. We strive to prove who we are to

both ourselves and others. While our fear might cause us to try to hide it, we are, indeed, "green."

I watch my senior certified law clerk as she anticipates upcoming bar exams. I see my son practicing "big law" in San Francisco as his firm undergoes a merger. I observe the struggles of the brilliant young lawyers who graduated a year ago and are still in pursuit of a law job with a paycheck big enough to both buy groceries and pay student loans.

The questions of "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" are reflections for a lifetime. But at the start of a career, they are foundational. Motivators for entering law school can vary from not knowing what to do with your sociology major (like me) to unspoken expectations to join the family profession. But upon graduation, the student becomes a lawyer and must ask these questions anew and in earnest.

When looking at one's life work and purpose, we can ask ourselves questions to become clear.

- Who would I most enjoy serving?
- When do I most enjoy myself at work?
- What do I have to contribute which is unique?
- What leaves me feeling great at the end of the day?

Being truthful with ourselves about the answers we discover frees us to see that we may choose to go in a direction with our career that we had never before considered.

So many new lawyers are living with the reality of huge student loan debt. The quandary of how to follow your calling while living above the poverty line can be very real. This is where a realization of the season of one's life can be helpful.

Early in one's career, it can be difficult to take the long



Susan Ann Koenig



Susan Ann Koenig, JD, is an executive coach and speaker who inspires and empowers successful people to make their greatest contribution. She is the author of *Divorce in Nebraska* and co-author of *Success Simplified---Simple Solutions, Measurable Results* with Stephen R. Covey. Susan is of counsel with Koenig Dunne Divorce Law in Omaha where she contributes to the blog, *Doing*

Divorce: A Thoughtful Discussion on Divorce at www.nebraskadivorce.com.

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view. After so many years of study and hard work, we are eager to reap some rewards. We find ourselves making comparisons to those in the top of our class who have captured those too few high paying jobs. Still, if we can recognize that we are in the spring of our career (no matter at what age we graduated), we can take a deep breath and take a long range look.

My first job out of law school ended when the small firm I worked for was unable to pay my \$15,000 a year salary. I went solo not long after; I hardly felt "successful." For years my income was lean and unpredictable, and the responsibilities tremendous. As I look back today, I see that in the spring of my life as a lawyer I planted seeds for careers both as a firm owner and as an executive coach.

Practicing, failing, and learning is a humbling reality for the novice lawyer, especially for those who were rock star students. With so many "firsts," the odds of misjudgments and minor mistakes increase. Add to this the countless skills not learned in law school, from how an introvert is supposed to be a rainmaker to discerning when to interrupt the senior partner with a question. In a season intended to build our confidence, we can be less sure of ourselves than ever.

At every season of our career, it is important to seek out support along the way. The power of letting in support cannot be underestimated. For the beginning lawyer, it is critical.

A "spring lawyer" can benefit from asking:

- Who might serve as role models for me?
- Where do I find mentor?
- How can I let in more support from my family?
- Would having a coach be useful?
- Am I willing to ask for help when I don't know or am not sure?

Being willing to let in help will not only accelerate your growth, but it will give your journey more ease and joy.

The first season of our life as lawyers is one of learning. Learning who we are as advocates. Learning who we are as colleagues. Learning that the process of learning the law is never ending.

Lawyers are accustomed to "knowing the answers." We are well educated. People pay us to have the "right" answers. For many of us, admitting we don't know---something, anything, or everything---can be extraordinarily uncomfortable. Early in our careers we are driven to appear competent and capable. If we ask too many questions, our deepest fear is that others will think us stupid, lazy, or incompetent.

When we fail to let in support, it costs us. The sooner an attorney can develop the capacity to do so, the sooner life gets easier. Shift the focus from avoidance of your discomfort to

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developing the skills to make you a great lawyer.

With so much to keep in mind, how does the lawyer beginning a career know what to focus on?

Avoid comparisons to other attorneys. Not everyone has the same calling, gifts, values, or priorities. I was never the attorney willing to put in the hours of many of my peers; it was useful for me to accept getting a paycheck the size of theirs was less important than having those hours in my week to devote to my other passions.

Avoid "either/or" thinking, such as "Either I am the associate with the highest number of billable hours or I can be a good spouse." Consider what is most important for this season, and give it more time, attention, and energy. Then give a little to that which you care about, but which is less important at this time. I didn't publish my first book until my youngest was 20, but when my children were small I allowed myself time to write an occasional letter to the editor.

Keep things smaller when your energy is pulled in multiple directions. You may not be able to take that ten day vacation, but carving out a Sunday afternoon for rest and rejuvenation with a nap or a hike can make a world of difference. Whether it

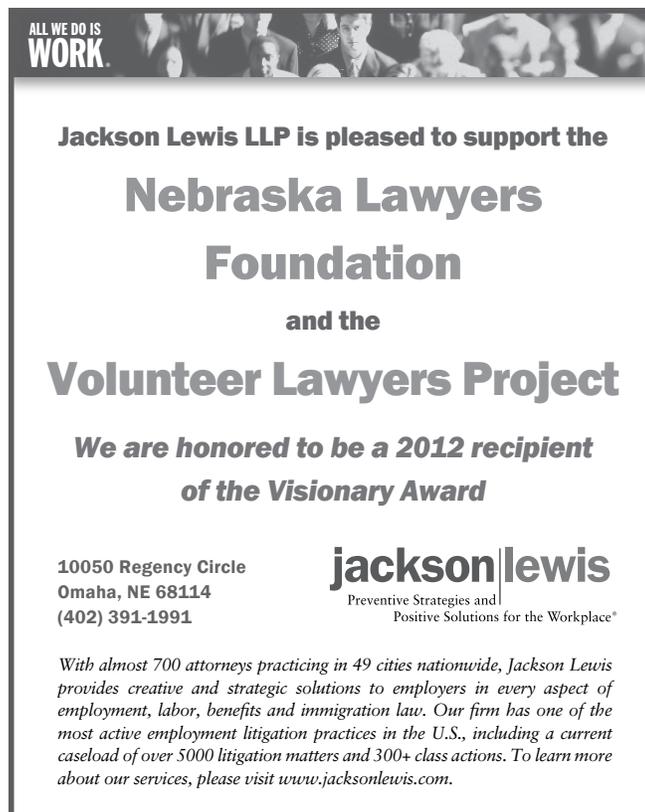
is your fitness plan or your savings plan, smaller is better when there's a lot on your plate.

Develop those good habits--both personal and professional---which will serve you for a lifetime. It will never be easier to learn them. Start with one. (See above: Keep things smaller.) So what if it takes you a year to develop a single new habit? You will have the rest of your life to enjoy its benefits.

Let in support. As lawyers starting out we may envy those farther along in their careers, but we can remember that no one got where they are without the help of others.

Be appreciative. When you are struggling to learn so much, be grateful you are not bored with your work. When your paycheck looks paltry, be grateful you are employed. When your hours are long, be grateful for good health that enables you to work them. When your workload is heavy, be grateful you are not the partner worrying about rainmaking. Living in gratitude can transform your life, no matter what the season.

Plant seeds for what you most want to grow. Tend to your garden. Remember that while some time will pass before you reap your full harvest, you can appreciate what you are creating right now. 



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