

Law School Ruined A Bunch of Good Janitors

By Alan Nelson

What's really you, and what's just the job? Do you have an intrinsic personality, or do you pick up characteristics from the biggest nearby egos? You may find you've become a legal [Zelig](#), like the 1983 Woody Allen movie of the same name. The mock documentary concerns Leonard Zelig, a human who changes his appearance and personality to whomever is in his vicinity.

A friend advised me this phenomenon exists in real life. It's called environmental dependency. This was the same friend who compared going to law school as suffering a head injury to the frontal temporal lobe. Some with this injury are affected by amnesia and by being a different personality in different environments, among other disorders.

Many spouses complain that law school stole the man or woman they married and put an arrogant, analytical zombie in their place who suddenly disappeared for eighty hours a week upon starting work at a firm. Many parents complain that law school screwed up their kids. (But they show up for free legal work.) Mine were no different. In six decades, my parents can name one lawyer they actually like.

You may remember some of your classmates dropping out the first year not because of grades, but because they don't like what they're becoming. In my class, a woman named Martha made law review. Then she quit. She didn't like her new thought process of picking apart words, analyzing every fact to death, and becoming aggressive on any issue.

When you got out of law school, you probably started working as a defense attorney, a plaintiff attorney, in a general law practice, or a criminal prosecutor. Some of your friends became prejudiced against defense attorneys. One of my former bosses, without a qualm, calls defense attorneys evil while he bewails all the spurious motions filed to rack up billable hours. Others became prejudiced against plaintiff attorneys, bewailing their greed, and jealous of the fact they didn't have to account for every minute of their day for billable hours. You see these attorneys, as well as yourself, become psychological reflections, or rather, psychological distortion of their job.

So what? So is everyone to a degree. You're a different person being with your friends versus being with your parents. This just sounds like teatime palaver at the local Junior League. Mental disease diagnoses are just a construct of the mental health industry in an attempt to rack up more things to bill insurance for.

The problem is, when you are hired to be a zealot to push your client's values on everyone else, the mental software starts adjusting. Over-acting lawyers are a stereotype in our society, but the stereotype of the ranting lawyer has more than a few grains of truth. An acquaintance of mine who worked cleaning and maintaining buildings while going to law school put it this way: "Law school ruined a bunch of good janitors."

You become what you work on. It's inescapable; it's only a matter of degree. You can easily test that thesis by visiting and comparing CLEs for real estate lawyers, bankruptcy lawyers, litigators and criminal defense attorneys. Each brand, with the usual number of exceptions, has its own peculiar personality and neurotic quirks. At some point, unlike Zelig, your personality freezes (like your mother warned it would!) would when you made those horrible, contorted facial expressions as a kid.

"You look at things too closely," my kid complains. "Why can't you be a normal parent?"

"Because I went to law school," I reply. "Get over it."