

BOTTOMS UP! HOW NOT TO ACHIEVE 'FREEDOM 50'

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I am skilled at deceiving others, including myself, especially when spiraling into substance misuse oblivion, dolefully and abruptly ending my illustrious, tab-and-ropes, litigation career at barely midlife. At least now, I no longer heave vociferously at the sight of work email, but I remain unable to pass through the tempered, glass door bearing my name. Incredibly, none of this materialized until I reached forty-five, after which everything in my life imploded spectacularly. At fifty, I retired, but not by choice; forcibly, if you will, at the hands of my dewy addictions. My odyssey will confound you; certainly, I remain sadly dazed, feebly tapped out of the law mercilessly and decisively.

The beginning: at the zenith of Y2K hysteria, I plunged greenly, *Mitch McDeere* style, into Bay Street pugilism, at the now defunct, steeped-in-tradition, ranked top five nationally, *Ogilvy Renault*. Nestled into a cloned mid-rise, unimbued flat, brown TD tower darkening Toronto's titular lawyers' row, the office tower was popularized decades later as the faux Manhattan headquarters of the venerable Harvey Specter, and where solicitor Gary Hoy posthumously earned a *Darwin* award for tragically lunging to his demise demonstrating the impenetrability of the twenty-fourth-floor windows.

A coveted ivory tower job, where the rubber truly hits the road, will reveal the mettle of every devil-may-care, abecedarian attorney. Work neverendingly and trade in your soulful ipseity to revel in clover, so long as you toe the line and ask few, if any, questions. Hit your billable target; dress modishly; produce, produce, produce, chasing glory, laud and the propitious bonus at your annual, hopefully praiseworthy, review.

Truthfully, mostly I reverently carried the tanned, worn-leather satchels of revered litigators, accompanied by their bespoke, monogrammed velvety pouches rumpling their tabs and robes. However, King and Bay remain the best legal pedagogy – work extremely hard; do it right; preparation is the key to success and, most importantly, win, by any means ethically.

In my early thirties, decorous to a fault, I could never say 'no', prolonging my exploitative servitude. I had worked *ridiculously* hard, stretching myself far too thin, inexorably north of double a regular, forty-hour work week. Eventually, after suffering ineffably, I played the tape forward, rebuffering my all-too-certain fate as a

paisley-tied, twice-divorced and dyed-in-the-wool equity partner. I yearned, admittedly pollyannaishly, to be more than a cog in the machine, perpetually taught to will a case into existence, even if the facts, the law, or the fair-handed administration of justice may not support a laudatory outcome.

Three years deep, contemporaneously embracing fatherhood, I desperately needed reprieve from my dialectic, pwned existence. Unabashedly I tendered notice of my stopgap absence for statutory, parental leave - the first, male lawyer in the establishment to do so, to the consternation of the peevisly orthodox, *fleur-de-lis* management. Evidently the *Civil Code* was silent on working men electing to care primarily for their children. Hence, my departure, in the guise of government-sanctioned, childcare leave, was not entirely cordial - there may have been some yawping, mutually, hastening my self-abnegating, precipitous exit from the venerated *Pearson Specter*, until the twelfth of never. My career downtown came to a sticky end. Swipe left - Bob's your uncle.

Within a fortnight, after unwittingly gentrifying south Cabbage town, we sold our razor thin, cookie-cutter, downtown townhouse, reminiscent of 12 *Grimmauld Place*, moving to my hometown, Lindsay, with our first born in tow. To pay our bills, my rampart wife, a business lawyer at a rival tier one, Bay Street juggernaut, propitiatory throughout the calamity, agreed to commute to-and-fro Hog town daily, exceeding an hour each way, at least until I conceived of a more judicious plan. She deserves sainthood.

Juridically disillusioned, I ran unsuccessfully for the McGuinty centrists in the 2003 Ontario general election. Remarkably the province washed over in a sea of red, except for my ostensibly dyed-in-the-blue, pastoral riding. Politics would not save me.

The Next Step: Having no formal training or credentials to do anything else, inevitability won. I hung my shingle in my hometown, endless forestry and shimmering lakes endowing its resplendence, ushering in Muskoka cottage country.

Ironically, I toiled even more building my own brand, awakening to coffee time at least once per week at my desk. No more laser-focussed, juridical stardom representing the likes of *Gordon Gecco* and Lloyds of London; rather, I had to pivot to a legal factotum, often reaching discreetly for my expository Bar Ad modules, triaging modestly if I even had a case on my hands. I laboured tirelessly to be reputed as the best lawyer; to own the biggest, most trusted legal brand, while in the process, as it turns out, laying waste to my own, mental wellbeing. My mental health would eventually square the score with my early-career irreverence.

Fast-forward twenty years to the week before Christmas in 2021 – at fifty years old, abruptly I “retired”, albeit involuntarily, from the law – permanently, no doubt. So precipitously had I scarped my own firm, not every of my clients were properly notified, nor could they have been. I had no choice; I had to exit, straightaway, scuppering my twenty-year endeavour. Devoid of *jeu d’esprit*, I shattered my own horcrux.

I need to explain....

By this time, I had built and co-owned with my wife the second largest, full-service law firm in central Ontario, housing ten lawyers and thirty non-lawyer professionals – a progressive, tech-savvy and community-focussed enterprise, known widely for top-drawer, skookum service and tenacious, never-say-die advocacy.

I had veritably everything any right-minded, mid-life lawyer would reasonably covet.

I had consistently, grossly billed more than a million dollars annually, practising exclusively civil litigation. I had achieved remarkable, financial success, decently preserved by my wife’s adroit, penny-wise planning, bolstered by her own, goodly income from successfully business lawyering next door to me for many years. She is widely accredited as the go-to business lawyer locally, if not beyond.

What’s more, I had been designated by the Law Society as a *Specialist in Civil Litigation*, bolstering my reputation as an aggressive, serious but sometimes pawky, sedulous litigator. My name appears as counsel in a few, precedent-setting cases.

I was published, too – for \$29.95, you can buy on Amazon my macabre, riveting bestseller: “*Grave Disputes – The Law of Dead Bodies in Ontario*”, don’t ask. Catchy, right? Unwittingly I find myself considered a national expert on cadaver jurisprudence. My work also appeared in national, legal journals and a plethora of online services. I co-authored CanLII’s new, user-friendly *Rules of Civil Procedure*. I collaborated with the late, great Jay McLeod, writing a chapter in his acclaimed, family law book. I eagerly co-authored a few legal works with the likes of Tom Allen, Scott Ritchie and Charles Scott, all Q.C., highly respected, mega lawyers.

I own a charming, Edwardian home at the heart of downtown Lindsay, while my growing, teenage children attend out-of-province university and the same private school as the now disgraced Prince Andrew.

I had been honoured by many awards and accolades, mostly locally. *Business Leader of the Year, COVID Hero, Queen's Jubilee, Best Employer, Best/Favourite Lawyer* repeatedly and I was, together with my wife, ceremoniously inducted to the regional *Business Hall of Fame*, among others. I chaired several, local community boards and was known as the go-to advisor for many social, non-profit agencies, often *pro bono*.

In veritably every aspect of my life, I am, or was, an all-or-nothing kind of guy – go big, or go home. Par exemple, when I decided to operate locally a kids' road hockey tourney supporting children's mental health, five years later it had morphed into the largest event of its kind nationally, shutting down the downtown core and raising tens of thousands. As a Hallowe'en devotee, I could not simply spookify my yard, no, for five years, I had to spend upwards of a hundred-thousand dollars annually from the Wards' coffers to run a massive, City-wide, online home decorating contest, "*Haunt Your Home*", enjoyed by more than a million, virtual visitors worldwide.

When not working, I coached my kids' competitive hockey, lacrosse, basketball and soccer, often doing the lion's share of the nightly, minivan shuffle for kids to attend myriad of activities. Financially sponsoring other kids' activities was also paramount for me; the back of many kids' sport jerseys bore my name. I exercised at least an hour every day, if not more, but cannot proclaim a healthy eating convention, nor could I today.

Doubtlessly, at risk of bovarism, I had accumulated ample fodder for a plentiful bio. No one ever accused me of being self-effacing. I shamelessly self-promoted both myself and my business, but never bumptiously, even at the risk of obloquy, all in the name of good business. While '*any media is good media*' may be cliché advice, undeniably it remains an efficacious mantra.

In any event, good fortune, it seemed, had smiled upon me.

Vicennially, I had dismissed "*burn out*" as a sort of generic, vocational risk, inchoate and mostly benign, or at least incapable of forcibly wresting my welfare from me. However, despite my judicial *tour de force* and business acumen, as I barrelled down on my mid-forties, selcouth changes corrupted my demeanour, revelatory harbingers of my burgeoning mental unwellness. At my basal layers, beneath even my emotions and moods, a tectonic, subliminal shift tortuously plunged me deeper towards my hellscape, while simultaneously nettling me for usurping my attention immoderately. Trapped as a denizen of my own, nebulous mind.

I became increasingly dour, while incessantly needing to organize everything assiduously, both at work and at home. Crescively my wiring short-circuited, often imperceptibly, culminating in abstruse impatience and intolerance of my family, colleagues and clients, oft forcing me to self-regulate, exhaustively, to avoid being overtly intractable and bilious. Dooming my poise and self-assuredness, I became querulous, rather than collaborative, insidiously ossifying everyday tasks imperiously upon the lives of both my family and co-workers. Some unidentifiable force kept dragging me towards inveterate volatility. Mercuriality infected my disposition.

Among my collegueship, no longer could I suffer pettifoggery, a necessary part of the job. The hot-and-cold of litigation life overwhelmed me. I could no longer allow my pursuit of excellence, of perfection, fueled by my self-assured hubris, to override everything else in my life. Autocracy normalized my life – co-workers and family were forced to lambent the eggshells spattered about both my office and home. Outwardly despotic with derisive hauteur, I descended into a moody, Bizarro doppelganger.

At mid-life, suddenly I struggled to keep even a patina of aplomb.

The Booze: Remarkably alcohol and drugs were never part of my life. I tippled only a handful of times annually. Occasional, social bibbing, at best, rarely to excess. Carousing and revelling seldom supplanted my subdued veneer. I never indulged in Schedule 1 substances, save for a few blunts in my eighties' hair-metal-loving, experimental youth. My only vice had been – and remains - tobacco, afflicting me since my late teens. I never thought about either, including on vacation. Historically I perceived alcohol as a one-night-only, sojourn to forced relaxation, mostly characterized by feeling dreadfully crapulous the next morning. It slowed me down.

Suddenly, mental unwellness had assailed me with celerity, ubiquitously. Medically, major depressive disorder and anxiety had the conn. Never had '*mental anything*' been identified as, or form, part of my own life's lexicon, diagnostically or otherwise. Worse, without fair warning, addiction reared itself rapaciously, incontrovertibly flowing directly from my inner maelstrom, at a singular, epiphanous moment in my life.

Particularly, at age forty-five and the apogee of my yet-to-be diagnosed tumult, while vacationing at a five-star, oceanside resort nearby Puerto Vallarta, playing sun-drenched euchre with my children, serendipitously I stumbled on my inaugural Bacardi white with coke, which tasted like another, and another, and so on. Previously I may have imbibed beer and red wine only, but scarcely, if ever, did I knock back spirits. Predictably, I indulged in this redolent panacea deep into the starry Caribbean

night. Occasionally I tossed into the mix a sugary delight, either a Miami Vice or Chocolate Monkey, mostly to avoid tipping off my wife to my newly discovered, rum-soaked gluttony.

Whatever happened that day, I made a new, ineffable connection with alcohol. Immediately I realized both relief and release from my own mind. I stopped checking my 'phone every few minutes; no longer would I suffer nomophobia, whilst ingratiating myself to Señor Masso's Bacardi gold. My mood transformed to ebullient joy. Everything seemed so much better. A return to my halcyon thirties, indeed.

Red eye offered me a veritable escape hatch, virtually instant reprieve from my stress, pressure and crushing need to win. My mind shut down, placidly, peacefully free of any professionally driven interference or disturbance. I focussed narrowly on and enjoyed myself and those around me. The old Jason rebounded, albeit sauced – silly, funny and dedicated to his kids. Liquor fell into my life like manna from heaven, salutary for my well-being, or so I perceived. Everything was better when I drank.

Predictably, I escalated. On this trip, and every vacation thereafter, I drank everyday, usually bellying up to the straw-roofed, tiled pool bar mid-afternoon, meandering back to my room around ten o'clock, often forgetful the next morning of the night before. Usually I needed to gently grasp my wife to navigate my way back to my tropical suite.

Alcohol inevitably followed me home, until I drank frenetically everyday there, too, far beyond satiation. While I avoided so-called day drinking for the most part, my workday shrunk over time, giving way to my need to get home to bend my elbow. Thankfully booze never stultified me at work.

After many months, I drank majorly red wine – voluminously, prefaced by a handful of *Cuba libre*. I was in deep, very deep. To illustrate, there is a marvelous, upscale Italian trattoria in Lindsay; I happen to know the sommelier proprietor, notably a Greek gentleman. Every Monday, I arranged for him to clandestinely deliver to my back door twenty-four bottles of California red. I ran dry and needed replenishment every Monday, beyond the ramp-up rum and cokes, a holdover from my Mexican epiphany a few years back.

Adeptly tipping my first bottle venustly, savouring the oaky, vanilla bouquet flowing like the salmon of Capistrano, while feigning my olfactory, toothsome delight, eventually I degenerated to corybantic slurping about the time I would lament over my empty, second bottle.

Oenophile, I was not, nor was I tasting flight. Rather, red wine served as the easiest to use, somewhat disguisable (*i.e.*, constant, discreet 'top-ups') and most socially unnoticeable manner of getting wasted. Whatever was in hand, I drank like I worked – extremely intensely; namely, to get to the feeling of ten drinks, as soon as possible. When inebriated, I was never bacchanalian, or riotously boisterous. Revelry was not my style. Rather, transmogrifying my comportment, I fiercely guarded my alcohol-induced, new tranquil, peaceful "*quiet time*". By sundown, too much booze had a somniferous effect upon me, like so many others.

Most evenings, in darkened solitude, pluvial tears soaking my faux-marble kitchen island, easily would I scarf a bottle or two of cab sauv, intermittently warbling heavy metal ballads capturing the eighties' zeitgeist, or maybe *The Strumbellas'* "*Guns in My Head*" on repeat, not only because it's written and sung by my little brother, while weepingly lamenting my predicament with sullen countenance. As usual, by my own vice and intemperance, every day would I disqualify myself for any conversation – usually about 8 o'clock.

During these three years, my mental health continued unabatedly towards rack and ruin, tumbling into turmoil, portending my inevitable departure from WARDS LAWYERS PC.

Most of the time did I become preoccupied by button-downed, prosaic day-to-day ritual. Towards the end of my drinking, each day at four in the morning I awoke to veisalgia, followed by battling it excessively in my home-made gym for three hours, mostly to cure my babelas and counteract my guilt for drinking the night before. Shiny and new again, I would shower, feed the kids, take them to school, fight the good fight at work until 3:30, or so, not only the bloodshed of the lawyer-and-lawyer battle, but also grappling with my own, mental adversaries and hangxiety, get blotto by 10 p.m. Wash, rinse, repeat, every single day.

While my spouse and I conversed earnestly about my spiraling descent, I had been gas-lighting her successfully for many months. *You're crazy....you're overreacting...Of course I can stop, whenever I want.* Thankfully, her sagacious nature meant she never quit on me – love shall conquer. Eventually we decided my only real choice was sobriety – complete cessation; we both realized I could not successfully limit or manage my alcohol use. Been there; tried that.

Sobriety: So, at age forty-eight, I finally realized the gravity of my compulsion. Notably my father was an alcoholic lawyer, too, so I must come by it honestly. He was more a jovial, John Candyesque lawyer's lawyer, not so fixated on the business of law. He died at that same age, putatively of esophageal cancer, for which alcohol is a

primary, contributing irritant. Ostensibly I failed to learn by his example. Sad, but so true.

On a Saturday night, tearfully I sent an e-mail to a professional, addiction coach, who advertised as "*Sober Elite*". My message was simple: "*I need some help*". Within the hour, I was on the 'phone with him and on my way to changing my life.

When the pandemic eventually seized Ontario in 2020, I went sober *holus-bolus*, embarking begrudgingly on my new, ascetic life, while abjectly disavowing any higher power and purposefully rejecting obsequious servility to the "*Big Book of A.A.*". I did so with sheer will, sprinkled with a little providence. I had enough A.A. in my life, with its plenteous incorporeality, occasionally suffering trauma-like flashbacks from accompanying my father to his dreadfully somber, church-basement sobriety meetings in the nineties. However, I enjoined both my professional, sober coach and a CBT-focussed psychiatrist for guidance and help in my suddenly abstemious existence.

Propping up my will to abstain, I still gulp the maximum dosage of fluoxetine daily, otherwise known as World War Z-inducing Prozac. Periodically, depending on my PHQ-9 score at that appointment, my treatment provider may throw an antipsychotic into the mix, Abilify, further zombifying my hazy reflexion. Later in rehab, I swore to myself that no drug would enter my body, unless medically prescribed.

But I hope quixotically not to rely on the beneficence of happy pills *sine die*. For now, my scornful derision of psychotropics notwithstanding, by boosting my serotonin, they mollify my headspace, a whirling dervish if unmedicated, and help me appreciate the value of losing, contrary to my nature, at least when I am constantly battling temptation. Along with my bi-weekly talk therapy, administered by a nonsense and evaluative, not only conciliatory, psychotherapist, brain candy offers me sanctuary headspace, howsoever ethereal.

I now understand that I constructed my own depressive condition; it was not bestowed upon me. So, the way I figure, I can deconstruct it, too, with the help of medication, ideally ephemeral, and therapy. My goal: transcend from Durkheim's realm of the profane, or the mundane rituals of my everyday life, to the realm of the sacred, or an enlightened worldview, in which my proclivity to resort to substances is gloriously controlled, if not eliminated.

I invested heavily in my sobriety – working intently with my CBT-focussed psychiatrist - three, forty-five-minute sessions weekly for over a year, mostly to jointly conceive of a plan whereby I could remain a working lawyer. We failed.

I learned in sobriety, alcohol use disorder (AUD) is medical, characterized by an impaired ability to stop or control alcohol use despite adverse social, occupational or health consequences – yup, that was me. Poster boy. You might know it as alcohol abuse, dependence, addiction or, the colloquial term, alcoholism. It is considered a brain disorder – prolonged changes in the brain caused by alcohol misuse perpetuate AUD and make fortuitous victims, like me, increasingly more vulnerable to relapse.

Never a fabulist, mind you, I perceived myself to be highly skilled at deceiving others and, as it turns out, myself, too, such a wrackful trait being the only reason I was able to end drinking. I persuaded myself that I needed only to be sober transitorily. Adhere rigorously to my professionals' counseling and, when they were satisfied I'm capable of purposefully abstaining, I would revert to managed (or "*controlled*") drinking only, consequentially obviating the need for me to forever relinquish my sacred, cardinal escape hatch. If not for my own self-chicanery, doubtfully could I have sobered up.

All through the pandemic and my early sobriety, I mistakenly ratcheted up my work intensity and need to be publicly known, believing erroneously that more notoriety would translate into more success for my firm. To illustrate, during COVID, I publicly posted between five to ten blogs daily about everything that I thought my community needed to know about the rapidly changing, uncertain world of Covid-19. So much so that, eventually, I was awarded a COVID Hero award by my municipality. Meanwhile, behind my outward altruism, I continued to spiral desperately into mental unwellness.

Now teetotaling, my top-of-the-line, customized F-150 Limited pick-up transformed into my protective womb, in which I resided for hours on end. Still do. Every abstemious morning, I parked stealthily behind my office building and remained anxiously in my truck for up to an hour, working myself up to cross the threshold and deal with my day, towards most of which I became deeply resentful. That truck offered me a One-Above-All force field – so long as I was in that truck, I was safeguarded, often feeling physically sick and languid at the prospect of having to leave that truck and walk through the glassy door bearing my name.

The Drugs: Soon I realized I could not continue working absent psychotomimetic experience – my proverbial escape hatch. Stalwart in my sobriety, I discovered, admittedly by design, another lifesaving respite conveniently cached in

the back room of my recently legalized cannabis store. Initially, gummies, usually two or three a day, followed by more discreet edibles, usually prepackaged, stale and indurated brownies and cookies. Yum.

Now, whoever exhorts that marijuana, or at least its active ingredient, THC, is not addictive, is full of shit. I became addicted to cannabinoids, uncontrollably. What began as a few, colourful and playfully innocuous-looking gummies transformed into a slew of concentrated, malachite THC gel caps, available only by special order through my local dispenser.

In my experience, so-called "*normie*" cannabis users often realize a moderate high by consuming a gummy, or two, or about five to ten milligrams of THC. So did I, but fleetingly. In the bat of an eye, I consumed, on average, seventy-five to one-hundred milligrams of THC daily, nearly ten times the daily average, irrationally careful never to exceed my centuplicate. Straight up, I walked around with a pocket bulging with THC pills, all of which would be devoured by eight o'clock, or so, that evening – my witching hour. Rarely did I awake to delightedly discover remnants from yesterday.

I began visiting my local cannabis retailers diurnally, furtively placing special, capacious orders. Eventually I had to scatter my business throughout the tri-county area, to avoid any retailer questioning my obscene use, if they even cared. Yes, I drove upwards of an hour one way on workdays to buy my precious pills. I held them with avarice, more vigilantly than Gollum clasped his ring.

If high noon had passed, I was very likely on my way to flying high. My lighthearted, newly discovered risibility only concealed my bitter resentment for my working life. I merely substituted THC for alcohol – both offered me the equivalent escapeway I coveted desperately every day. Irrationally I prided myself for abstaining from alcohol, despite synchronously becoming a drug addict. Akin to alcohol, THC made me pacific, serenely magnanimous around others, especially my children. *Mary Jane* instantly offered me reprieve from my own, continually spinning, cognitive mouse wheel, freedom from the trappings of my self-snared, psychical aberrations.

For decades, my workday wouldn't end until my inbox was empty. That was my rule. Only an empty inbox offered me the ability to reward myself for a good day's work. I also made it my edict to reply to e-mails and messages within minutes, unless it was impossible to do so. These practice habits were suppressed when I consumed substances – miraculously, they freed me from the vocational manacles I had sedulously self-developed and supported over decades of lawyering. I needed that

relief; I could not continue advocating vociferously, or at all, without that singular release from my own doing.

While I was drinking and well into my sobriety and drug use, I experienced strong headaches all day and usually throughout the night. I was consuming upwards of twenty to twenty-five Tylenol extra strength reds daily, including when I was drinking, until a medical doctor warned me that I would likely poison myself fatally if I did not stop.

When I received e-mails from a client or another lawyer at home in the evening, particularly if it related to any conflict, I often became physically sick, usually vomiting. Often my heart would pound relentlessly, causing me to question if I were experiencing cardiac distress. Occasionally I would suffer a panic attack, crippling me entirely. I could not process conflict, not like before, or at all. Whereas once I thrived on conflict, or at least perceived I did, I could no longer endure any conflict. I felt helpless and, more importantly, useless.

Soon, I had been on a one-year, cannabinoid jones.

Early on my wife foxily began quizzing me about events the preceding evening. Consequently, often muddled, I soon cultivated my contrite-appearing, silent treatment or, if needed, my ol' stand-by: outrightly accuse her of paranoically confounding me. That's just good gas-lighting.....

Eventually THC scarcely satiated me. I needed more escape; more release; more peace. Suddenly I found myself coveting triturerated, powder white and other unmentionable substances. That scared me, immeasurably.

I wallowed at my low-water mark....and I knew it.

Rehab: No longer could I careen junked-up down this pill-popping road, often with the pedal to the metal. I knew if I did, certainly would I land on a lower level of Dante's *Inferno*, from which I could not return. Thankfully, my temptation for mind-altering relief was overpowered by my profound fear of losing my family. At the end of my proverbial rope, I tied a knot and finally reached out for help – yet again.

Rock bottom – the self-poured footing on which I would try to reconstruct my life, ideally better than ever. My ascension had to be paramount, lest everything I righteously loved in my life would never prevail.

On my fiftieth birthday, Superbowl Sunday in 2022, mostly due to my wife's relentless beseeching and her express, or at least forcefully implied, ultimatum, I checked into a wonderful, immersive rehab facility in Montreal. Thirty days later, I was one of five who were released, of the twenty who initially entered with me, most of whom failed to make it through. "*Only the penitent [person] shall pass*", surmised Indiana Jones.

I wish rehab on no one; it is no vacation. My PTSD-like flashbacks endure. The objective of rehab, replete with slow-paced, didactic lecturing, is to break you down mercilessly, until you discover your basic self, before rebuilding you salutarily, while equipping you with effective tools to control your penchant for mind-altering experience. No reading; no 'phones; no life - austere furnished and monochromatically styled, conjuring Amy Winehouse's poignant "*Back to Black*" video, an iconic anthem of the Noughties, with enervating, mind-numbing routine. Many tears, while forcibly declaring everything wrong about yourself before you're green-lighted to rejuvenate anew. Yet, it worked, at least so far.

Since March, 2022, I have been clean and sober, determinately. No boners of the illicit kind, thankfully.

But, still, I remain a dry drunk, not yet enlightened - I have yet to salubriously realize, like many of those I know in the sober community, the value proposition of being drug-and-alcohol free. I continue to "*do the work*", as they say, in earnest and wholeheartedly. Finally, I have learned there is truly no purposive end to remaining disingenuous with myself, despite my proclivity to self-indulgently achieve my own ends by any means necessary.

Now I rarely utter the word "*addiction*", connoting to me some form of sentient being, capable of invading and controlling ourselves. My use of alcohol and drugs were more fairly characterized as my repetitive, even ritualistic, pathological need to self-comfort, presumably derived from adverse childhood experience. Some refer to childhood trauma, but this is too narrowly construed and far too strident sounding. The need to self-comfort can arise from less than traumatic events, as it did in my case. In all my work with my psychiatrist, we identified no discernable trauma as the provenance of my substance use disorder.

However you might label substance dependency, invariably it flows from underlying mental health conditions. In my case, I have been diagnosed with major depressive disorder and accompanying anxiety, conditions I have likely suffered from, but suppressed successfully, for much of my life. They materialized overtly over time to the extent that I eventually, perhaps unwittingly, discovered my need for an

escape hatch; namely, alcohol and, subsequently, drugs. Otherwise "*mental health*" did not enter my self-directed lexicon until age forty-eight.

Giving Back: I am truly fortunate, in an enviable position – financially, I am able not to work, if that may be my course. When not inscrutably mired by Byzantine disability insurance paperwork, I now covet opportunities to offer public service, of whatever kind, employing skills and attributes I developed lawyering.

And, at risk of being trite, I wish to give back to my community, including charitably. My life experience has equipped me with certain prowess that I could apply effectively to help others. My *jouissance* for life is not reprimanded. By no measure am I now given to forebodings – I am no doomsayer about my future; rather, I remain hopeful.

Hackneyed as it may be, in seeking to help others, or whatever chart I course, I remain acutely mindful that I am an addict. I cannot continue litigating cases, or even lawyering, at this time, no matter how much treatment I endure. I am not cured, nor have I regenerated into my old self. I am no phoenix from the flames. Rather, I take life one day at a time, as recommended by those in the know, who have travelled this path before me.

I remain devastated and profoundly crestfallen by my self-induced, forced exit from my profession, forfeiting my vigesimal career. I had it all – it seemed wholly irrational, if not crazy, to have abruptly abandoned what I had, as I did. I now realize I had no choice; this has helped me foggily reconcile what I had done. I had to vacate my firm, my passion, my baby, not only for my own sake, but for my family, too.

Conflict Culture: I know of no other profession like the law, characterized by widely accepted conflict. Every day as a lawyer, you must debate, argue and often engage in conflict with other lawyers as smart and effective as, if not more so, than you. Our profession is indeed a conflict culture – it cannot be sensibly characterized any other way. Arguably some lawyers, like litigators, may grapple with more conflict than others, but every lawyer encounters immense conflict every day, no matter the practice area.

Conflict culture is exacerbated by the unique, high expectations thrust upon us, as lawyers, by clients, co-workers and others. We are constantly expected to succeed, often by besting other lawyers by any ethical means available. We are expected to be champions, every time and for many years for most of us. Conflict is ubiquitous in the legal profession...and can oft be pernicious.

Now, reflect on being forced to engage in this demanding, high expectation-driven, conflict culture for years on end, even decades. Invariably it affects our blueprint, wiring, personality and demeanour, typically negatively. How could it not?

I dispute that lawyers fully appreciate this profound effect on us, abetted by the very nature of our jobs. When I was educated to be a lawyer, no one told me about this risk. No one taught me about the importance of wellness and, likewise, the pernicious and insidious nature of substance dependency in our esteemed profession. Periodically emerging empirical data laggardly proffered tells the incontrovertible tale – we have a shocking surfeit of mental health unwellness in our legal community, and consequential addiction, seemingly obstreperous to remediation.

The Regulator, et al.: Ironically or, possibly revealingly, as a self-governed-and-insured entity, unquestionably there is inadequate practical, meaningful regulatory support available to us, particularly in the event of crisis. I had to navigate my odyssey singly. Bi-weekly, thirty-minute Zoom sessions with a non-lawyer, counsellor was incommensurate with my needs.

Never once have I received a call from my governing body or insurer about my ungracious resile from our profession, barely even a salutation for my disability-driven departure. Indeed, it seemed even burdensome to guilelessly deactivate my working status and insurance premiums. While this assessment may seem harsh, deservedly so. *Ceteris paribus*, I would rather be mentally unwell in another profession, like healthcare – for example, *Caduceus* meetings and support groups exclusively for and guided by medical professionals in recovery from alcohol-or-drug-use disorders, the *Doctors Drop-In Group* and a seemingly robust and comprehensive *Wellness Hub*.

The Future: Now is the time to entirely re-examine how we work and how we equip ourselves to effectively do our jobs, while minimizing the potential harm concomitant with the conflict-driven, vagaries and vicissitudes of our profession. We must no longer acquiesce to our autonomous, self-governing regulator, insurer and myriad associations forever continuing to pass over perfunctorily, wilfully blindly, the singular, utmost threat to our profession: alcohol-and-drug use disorders and their rudimental source - mental health unwellness.

We must never be ashamed of our mental wellbeing, but not rallying hurriedly to improve it shames us all. There is no end to our mental wellness, no terminus; rather, it is a limitless undertaking, to be embraced earnestly by us all.

Merely destigmatizing mental health is insipient, unitedly we must strive for enterprise-wide realization and a constitutive, reconstructionist about-face, inclusively and diversly. Mental health malady happens not only to others – preparatory awareness and support is the key to success. There is no clemency in tacitly nodding our heads in unison; root-and-branch *perestroika* of lawyers' mental health support is overdue. Every, salutary contribution, no matter the scale or measure, affects the life of a fellow, if not your own:

"Nobody made a greater mistake than [they] who did nothing because [they] could do only a little." – E. Burke

For now, in a woefully underserviced vocation, be flawsome, too.

More information about my experience:

Canadian Bar Association/Modern Law Podcast:

"Episode 18 – A personal story about alcohol and substance abuse in the legal profession"

<https://www.cba.org/Podcast/Modern-Law>

The Law Times (Ontario/news article):

"Battling alcohol and THC addiction, Jason Ward left the law and can't see over going back"

<https://www.lawtimesnews.com/practice-areas/real-estate/battling-alcohol-and-thc-addiction-jason-ward-left-the-law-and-cant-see-ever-going-back/373283>

The Advocate Podcast:

"Episode 74 Jason's Journey"

<https://www.podbean.com/site/EpisodeDownload/PB13791A35XCSP>

The Peterborough Examiner (News article):

"Lindsay lawyer Jason Ward opens up about struggles with mental health and addiction that led to him leaving practice"

<https://www.thepeterboroughexaminer.com/local-kawartha-lakes/news/2023/02/03/lindsay-lawyer-jason-ward-opens-up-about-struggles-with-mental-health-and-addiction-that-led-to-him-leaving-practice.html>

Kawartha 411 (Interview):

"Sunday Drive with Jason Ward – Parts 1 and 2"

<https://www.kawartha411.ca/2023/03/05/sunday-drive-part-two-with-jason-ward/>

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