

Redefining Personal Narratives

By CHRISTOPHER A. KLEPPS

Everyone has a personal story or narrative about who they are. Those stories aren't limited to past events. Most people also have a story about their future and who they will become. For some reading this, your story may entail becoming partner at a large firm, opening up and building a firm of your own, or becoming general counsel of a corporation. Writing our future stories helps us take the proper steps to achieve an ultimate goal. However, personal stories may also limit us and hold us down. As any attorney knows, the further we are into a piece of writing, the harder it is to rewrite it. Stories therefore can become obstacles to professional and personal growth.

I know this firsthand. Here's my story.

I grew up in Bristol, CT. I didn't grow up wanting to be a lawyer. In high school I gravitated toward English classes because I enjoyed writing and critical thinking and did not like math. When I graduated from college, I applied to law school because I honestly didn't know what else to do with an English degree, but also because being a lawyer seemed interesting and would hopefully pay well.

I did well at Quinnipiac School of Law, but I had no idea what kind of lawyer I wanted to be. In the fall of my 2L year, I applied to several law firms for a summer associate position because faculty told me that I should. I accepted a summer position at a Hartford law firm because I received an offer. It was there that I discovered I wanted to be a litigator. I accepted a position at that same firm after graduation because that's where I spent my 2L summer.

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As a young associate, the story I had written was to work hard and make partner in seven years. It's what I think I wanted at the time, but it's also what people around me expected. But my story doesn't end as a partner in private practice. Here's why.

I was sticking to my personal narrative as a fifth-year associate. Reviews were good, the people who mattered seemed to like me, and I was hitting my billable hour targets. I always *hated* billable hours, but they were manageable. That changed in August 2017. My wife and I were expecting our first child. I was also stressed at work. One day, while sitting in my office checking emails, my heart abruptly jumped to what felt like 200 beats-per-minute. I thought for a terrifying moment that I was dying, but later discovered I had experienced my first panic attack. Although my heart rate soon returned to normal, I wasn't ever able to fully shed the anxiety that episode produced. Working long hours to hit a billable hour target suddenly became a lot harder.

Billing hours became harder still after my son was born in March 2018. The value proposition had shifted. I wanted to work on interesting and challenging matters but without an arbitrary hour target that reset every year.

In early 2019 I was encouraged to apply for partner later that year. That's when I realized I needed to find a job outside of private practice. I knew I couldn't continue on the same trajectory, and making a career change would be harder if I made partner. My job was interesting and intellectually challenging, but I wanted better (for me) work/life balance. I accepted a job at The Hartford, where I currently have all of those things.

That day in August 2017 was not part of the story that I had written as a first-year associate, but I doggedly stuck to the script for over two years. I kept telling myself that I would figure it out and that everything would fall into place. But there's a fine line between resilience and stubborn

denial. Making a career change is also difficult and scary. And so I chose the status quo for too long, avoiding a major rewrite.

Goals are important for any person or organization. But it is hazardous to persistently stick to your predefined story. I allowed my story to act as an obstacle rather than as a guiding principle for far too long. It's difficult, but I am constantly working toward being flexible in the face of abrupt change, and also not shying away from being the force that changes the status quo.

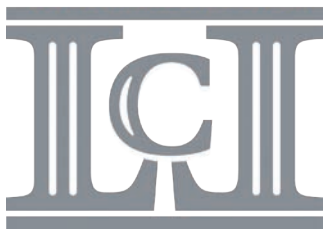
My message to young attorneys is this: don't stick to a script simply because it's what you wanted at a prior point in your life or what others want for you. Be flexible, constantly reassess, understand that who you are now is a different person than who you used to be, and don't be afraid to take a leap if deep down you know that the right decision is to jump. ■



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