

Taming the Legal Ego: Separating Professional Identity from the Self

By TANYEE CHEUNG

Back in 2021, I came to the realization that during my almost thirty years of legal practice, I had developed a carefully crafted professional identity, which I will call the "legal ego." This persona was built slowly over time and without my realizing, it became my default (even spilling over into my personal realm). My legal ego served as armor, helping me navigate demanding (and sometimes difficult and harsh) clients, supervisors, and opposing counsel, challenging negotiations, and the constant intellectual demands of the profession. I saw the value in the armor but realized that my legal ego could also undermine my well-being. I wondered, might legal egos contribute to our profession's troubling rates of burnout, anxiety, and depression? Would awareness mitigate some of these dangers? What could be done to tame the legal ego?

How the Legal Ego Gets Formed

From the first day of law school, attorneys are trained to "think like a lawyer" - to analyze relentlessly, argue persuasively, anticipate problems at every turn, and "win."

The legal ego typically embodies several characteristics:

- A problem-focused orientation that excels at identifying what could go wrong
- A drive for perfectionism and intolerance of mistakes
- An adversarial readiness that remains vigilant for challenge

- A tendency toward intellectual dominance and authoritative expression
- A constant comparative assessment
- A strong attachment to outcomes, wins, and being right

These characteristics can help us perform at a high-level but if we aren't careful, we can embody these traits in an unhealthy way. Over-identification with these characteristics can lead to rigidity and righteousness. Before one even realizes, our minds and bodies can adopt a constant state of defensiveness or discomfort. Mistakes made and criticisms received become a chink in the armor and the legal ego demands us to protect it. We become so engrossed in this task that we forget that we are not the legal ego and that our work doesn't define who we are.

The Antidote to Over-Identification: Witness Consciousness

How might the legal ego typically spring into action, and what can we do about it? Let's take the example of an attorney who receives a harshly worded email from opposing counsel / client / supervisor / partner criticizing a recent filing or draft of a legal document. For some of us, the legal ego immediately springs to defense-generating internal dialogue about counterattacks and rehearsing brilliant rebuttals. For others, the legal ego might feel bruised, triggering anxiety about our abilities or how we are perceived. Unchecked, the legal ego might fire off a scathing email adding to tensions or it might ruminate about how the email undermines it and start to conjure feelings of unworthiness. These paths utilize energy unnecessarily

and obscure the clearest path forward.

How can we begin training ourselves to recognize the "voice in our head" telling us how to act and feel? For me, the teachings of Michael Singer, a lifelong spiritual learner and teacher and an accomplished businessperson (he started many companies and became chairman of WebMD) was the start of a continual practice of releasing the legal ego. A basic tenet of his teachings focuses on the concept of "witness consciousness," the ability to observe one's thoughts, emotions, and identity constructs without becoming absorbed by them. By cultivating a mindset where one recognizes these reactive thoughts and is conscious of, but not drawn into, the chatter, we can calm our inner voice and create space for a more centered response. Witnessing the thoughts generated by the legal ego without letting it control the situation is what Michael Singer describes as "stepping back into the seat of consciousness."

This step allows us to objectively view the situation, separating true facts from opinions and conjectures. By recognizing that the legal ego has been trained to fight and/or fret, the attorney sitting in the seat of consciousness can choose to act with intention rather than allow the legal ego to react.

The Inner Courtroom: Quieting the Constant Judgment

The legal ego has been trained to evaluate, assess, and judge. Judgment might be of our critic, or it might be of ourselves (our own worst critic). Too often, judgement

can become hyperactive, taking up all the air in the room. The secret to centeredness is to first quiet the judge. Let it know that evaluator and assessor need equal time. Whether judging others or oneself, learn to separate the actual message from the message heard by the legal ego.

In the above scenario where the legal ego is critical of others, that might look like the following:

- "Maybe X was having a bad day, they could have just been affected by their own personal situation."
- "I don't know why X was so harsh, but it doesn't really affect the underlying discussion."
- Can I address X's comments without lashing out OR feeling the need to defend myself?"

In the scenario where the legal ego is critical of oneself, that might look like the following:

- "Just because X has certain opinions, doesn't make them true."
- "Even if I missed a point, one mistake doesn't define me. Let me focus on finding a solution, rather than beating myself up."

The goal is to address the underlying legal issue without tying personal worth, resentment, or anger to the solution.

The Professional Paradox: Excellence without Attachment

A common objection to spiritual practices in high-performance fields is the concern that non-attachment can diminish professional excellence. There is a belief that if one is not obsessing about their work, their performance will suffer. In reality, releasing attachment to outcomes and opinions of others paradoxically improves performance. Motivation is no longer based on fear or pride but by doing the best job we can. By remaining centered and not focused on the outcome or other's opinions, we act more rationally. We know that success can take many forms beyond the narrow definition of "winning."

For attorneys, this means practicing law

with full commitment to professional excellence while releasing the personal identification with results.

This might look like:

- Preparing thoroughly for a hearing while releasing anxiety about the judge's ruling.
- Making compelling arguments without tying personal worth to their reception.
- Advising clients skillfully while releasing the need to be perceived as all-knowing.
- Negotiating assertively while remaining inwardly undisturbed by the other side's tactics.

As Michael Singer notes, "The truth is that most of life will unfold in accordance with forces far outside your control, regardless of what your mind says about it." This perspective doesn't diminish professional responsibility but contextualizes it in a way that prevents the enormous stress of believing we can and must control everything.

Practical Practices for Legal Professionals

1. Morning Identity Separation Practice

Before checking emails or entering "lawyer mode," spend 5-10 minutes in silent awareness, reminding yourself: "I am not my thoughts. I am not my accomplishments. I am not my legal identity. I am the consciousness that witnesses all of these."

This brief practice establishes a foundation of awareness that can be returned to throughout demanding days. It reminds you to pause.

2. The Billion Things Rule

Attorneys can often perceive themselves as having more responsibility and control than they really do. While twenty people might have reviewed a brief or contract, they feel the full weight of the blame on their shoulders where there is an error. Conversely some, based on training to defend the legal ego, absolve themselves of any responsibility, placing the blame else-

where. Neither are likely true, and both utilize energy in non-productive ways. Remove blame from the equation entirely and focus on lessons learned.

This might include writing a brief reflection and consciously acknowledging that a billion actions contributed to the result. Provide realistic tangible actions (with a risk/reward understanding) that can be used for future transactions/cases. Keep the knowledge you have gained while letting go of the emotions and baggage that might have arisen during the process.

3. The Trigger Witness Practice

Identify your specific professional triggers (e.g. certain opposing counsel, particular client behaviors, or specific types of feedback from supervisors). When these arise, practice Michael Singer's teaching of observing your reaction with curiosity rather than identification.

Note the physical sensations, the thoughts that arise, and the emotions generated. Check to see if your body has gone into an automatic flight, fight, or fret response. Use the moment as an opportunity to remind your body that better decisions are made when those automatic feelings are released. Practice remaining centered in these situations. It takes time but it's worth it!

The Freedom Beyond Professional Identity

In legal education and practice, little attention is paid to the psychological impact of crafting and maintaining a professional identity that is often problem focused and highly critical. The profession's troubling mental health statistics likely reflect the consequences of this oversight.

By applying non-attachment/identification teachings, attorneys can begin to experience "unconditional well-being," a sense of well-being that isn't dependent on case outcomes, partner approval, client satisfaction, or billable success. Rather, our well-being comes from objective view of our efforts and work.

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to prior counsel and Disciplinary Counsel's requests for details of the settlement. *Millman v. William John Hennessey*, #23-0165.

Discipline imposed under Practice Book Section 2-37(a)(5) for violation of Rules 1.8(h)(1), 1.8(h)(2), 3.3(a)(1) and 8.4(4) where attorney, who was alleged to have taken a \$750 retainer to draft a Will, denied receiving the retainer, denied meeting the proposed testatrix and did not draft any Will. When complainant daughter sought the Will after the death of her mother, attorney paid her the sum of \$750 requiring her to sign an agreement prospectively limiting his liability although daughter was not represented by other counsel. Attorney ordered to take 6 hours of in-person CLE in ethics within one year in addition to annual

CLE requirements. *Williamson v. Jamaal T. Johnson*, #23-0050.

Discipline imposed under Practice Book Section 2-37(a)(7) for violation of Rule 1.15(b) where attorney, with no intent or harm to any client, failed to keep accurate ledgers for all client's funds in his IOLTA and failed to remove earned fees in a timely manner. Attorney ordered to provide quarterly audit reports of his IOLTA for two years. Panel noted Respondent's dedication and service to his clients. *Slack v. Jeremiah Nii-Amaa Ollennu*, #23-0122.

Discipline imposed under Practice Book Section 2-37(a)(5) for violation of Rule 8.1(2) and Practice Book Section 2-32(a)(1) where attorney failed to respond to disciplinary complaint believing it to be fraudulently filed and, when contacted

by Disciplinary Counsel, failed to file information in accordance with procedural framework. Attorney ordered to take 2 hours of in-person CLE in ethics within 9 months in addition to annual CLE requirements. *Berrios v. Elizabeth Jane Rohback*, #22-0505.

Reprimand issued for violation of Rules 1.5(a), 1.5(b), 8.4(1) and 8.4(4) where attorney, in divorce matter, sought to collect a \$75,000 "bonus fee" from client after a successful mediation based upon a fee agreement which did not provide client with the ability to reject any claim for a bonus. Client had paid attorney's firm \$96,000, not including any bonus. Client ultimately sought new counsel who finalized matter substantially in accord with the mediation results. *Dangremond v. Jeffrey Hill*, #22-0158.

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It allows attorneys to practice from a place of centered awareness rather than anxious attachment. Attorneys can focus their energy on the task at hand, rather than on defending themselves or on the fears and insecurities that can come from that inner voice. From this space, legal work becomes something attorneys do rather than something they are. Challenges are viewed on parity with success, both contributing to our growth.

As Michael Singer writes: "There is nothing more important to true growth than realizing that you are not the voice of the mind—you are the one who hears it." For attorneys whose minds are particularly active and whose professional identity is particularly strong, this realization can be profoundly liberating.

The legal profession requires its practitioners to construct and inhabit an identity defined by analytical prowess, adversarial readiness, and perfectionist standards. Witness consciousness offers a pathway to practicing law skillfully while shedding the identity that can often cause anxiety and stress. Reminding us that beneath the suits, arguments, and legal brilliance exists a consciousness that witnesses it all, untouched by the day's perceived victories and defeats.

This separation of professional identity from authentic self may be the most powerful wellbeing practice available to attorneys in a profession that demands so much of mind and spirit. ■



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The Newest "Dirty Words" *Continued from page 35*

¹⁵ See *id.*

¹⁶ See Kiara Alfonseca, *These Companies are Standing By Their DEI Policies Amid Backlash*, ABCNEWS (Jan. 23, 2025, 9:20PM), <https://abcnews.go.com/Business/companies-sticking-dei-amid-backlash/story?id=118037109>.

¹⁷ See *id.*

¹⁸ Judge Largely Blocks Trump's Executive Orders Ending Federal Support for DEI Programs, ASSOCIATED PRESS (Feb. 21, 2025, 9:01PM), <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/21/nx-s1-5305287/trump-dei-programs-executive-order-judge>.

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