

Creating A Statement Of Your Mission

by Terrence A. Leahy © 1999

This outline is devoted mostly to exercises meant to help you get started on crafting a mission statement that fits you. Before getting down to work, though, a few remarks are in order about the value of that work.

A mission statement is a statement of your mission. It is an answer to the question “Why am I here?” It functions as a personal constitution – words which capture and express what is most deeply important to you.

Why bother with one? A man imprisoned for life, in “The Shawshank Redemption”, gave the best answer I’ve heard when he observed that “It all comes down to a choice: Either get busy living, or get busy dying.”

Your death draws an inch closer with each breath that you draw. That it will one day arrive at your door is something over which you haven’t a choice. Your choice lies, instead, in how you will spend the time that remains between now and that day.

You can spend it living. Or you can spend it dying. The choice is your’s.

To spend it living means doing what you know to be truly important. To spend it dying means frittering it away in meaningless acts of little consequence.

So, suppose you choose to spend it living. How do you tell what is truly important?

Having a mission statement helps. It can help inform the choices you make about how you invest your time. Hold it up to the opportunities which present themselves and see how they measure up against what you believe is important.

Your time, according to noted author Stephen Covey, is at any given moment being spent in one of these four ways:

- (1) Doing what is both *urgent* and *important* (i.e. giving your closing argument in that personal injury case you've been bankrolling for years);
- (2) Doing what is *urgent* but not important (i.e. scrambling to meet some deadline someone else has arbitrarily set);
- (3) Doing what is *important*, but not urgent (i.e. enrolling in that public speaking class you hope might help you give smoother presentations in group settings); or
- (4) Doing what is *neither* urgent nor important (i.e. veging in front of the TV).

So fervently does Covey believe in the power of a mission statement to inform one's choices about how to invest one's time that he has devoted an entire book, entitled "First Things First", to just that very subject – How to apply your mission statement in weekly planning and in daily choices to spend more time on what you believe is important.

The need to discern and state in written words one's mission in life is particularly acute for us lawyers. We, along with the rest of the national workforce, are confronting job burnout at an increasing rate. An article in the Los Angeles Times last summer noted that

“ . . . [C]ounselors and researchers believe that more workers today experience burnout even as the economy booms, because people are putting in longer hours and facing greater demands on all fronts; Technology requires ever more knowledge and faster responses. Family members refuse to wait for attention.”

. . . Some of the signs of job burnout include insomnia, chronic fatigue, aches and pains and depression, Ondrusek says. People also may exhibit distraction, feelings of worthlessness, difficulty in making decisions, profound sadness and anger.

. . . [I]f you're burned out – that is, you've lost energy, enthusiasm and meaning in what you do – experts say what you really need to do is re-engage in work, not retreat.”

But, to lawyers, the notion of curing burnout by embracing the work that caused it is akin to hugging a porcupine to rid yourself of its needles. The work we lawyers do is inordinately stressful. The advocate engages in constant verbal combat. The transactional lawyer strains to foresee an unforeseeable future and to find the words which will carry the day in a battle which is years down the road.

High levels of stress, endured over extended periods, may spawn toxic consequences, with which lawyers struggle to cope. Fleeing, in its various form, seems a natural response to the stress.

And fleeing can take many forms. One might flee into substance abuse. Or into a concentration camp mindset not unlike the grimace-and-bear-it frame of mind of the person who shovels up after the elephants along the route of the Seafair Parade. Or into

depression. Or out of the profession. Or, worst of all, right out of this world, a “solution” which some regrettably pick, as Michael Sweeney notes in an article he wrote for the March-April 1998 issue of “Bar Leader”.

In 1995, a Portland lawyer wrote a suicide note to his family and then drove to his favorite fishing spot in central Oregon. While sitting in his vehicle, he shot himself. A year later, another lawyer practicing in the Willamette Valley of Oregon left a suicide note to the members of his law firm, and then walked to a park near his office and shot himself.

Both lawyers were experiencing depression. With it came the distorted thinking that a permanent solution to a temporary problem was the answer.

. . . In 1991, John Hopkins University in Baltimore interviewed 12,000 workers about depression. Lawyers ranked No. 1 on the list of the occupations that were most depressed.

While 3 percent to 9 percent of the population at any given time may experience depression, a quality-of-life survey conducted by the North Carolina Bar Association in 1991 reported that almost 26 percent of the bar’s members exhibited symptoms of clinical depression. Almost 12 percent of them said they contemplated suicide at least once a month.

. . . Continued high levels of stress over a long period of time, without adequate coping strategies, can lead to burnout. Burnout is nothing more than a form of depression. It has been defined as a type of depression characterized by apathy, negative feelings about the job, declining productivity, increased illness, and difficulty in personal relationships. Sometimes it includes an increase in substance abuse.”

A mission statement, I believe, is of particular value to that lawyer, covered with porcupine needles, who is loathe to take the source of his injuries back into his arms. A mission statement might help to guide you to a place within the profession which, for

you, represents the porcupine's soft, needle-less underbelly, a place much less painful to touch.

In other words, once you have pulled forth from inside of yourself a clear notion of what you most deeply believe is important to you, you can then more productively consider this question: "Is there a way in which I can do what I know to be important within this profession I'm in?" Say, for instance, that you discover that building community is something you deeply value. Knowing that, you can then ask yourself "Is there some area of law, or some part of this legal profession, in which I can apply myself to this community building I find so important?"

To pose that "Is-there-some-area-of-the-law" question to yourself *before* you've made the effort to discern what's important to you leads you nowhere. Try it. Ask yourself this question: "Is there some area of law, or some part of this legal profession, in which I can apply myself to do what's important?" That question is more likely to elicit a question than an answer, the question being "Well, what is it I feel is important?"

Many are discovering that asking oneself that very question may lie at the very heart of the movement to enhance professionalism within the profession. Those in legal academia, for instance, are now waking up to the fact that posing this "What is it *I* feel is important?" question to each lawyer-want-to-be may be important in engendering the professionalism they seek to impart. An article by Linda Kulman appearing in U.S. News and World Report in March of 1998 stresses this very point.

Law students usually study doctrine, ideas at the heart of disciplines like contracts or constitutional law. But in [a class at Northeastern University, co-taught by Boston law firm Hale & Dore, called “The Legal Profession: Challenges of the 21st Century”], they and lawyers working with them were being asked to do something once considered unlawyerly: explore their own values. Their assignments included writing a personal mission statement . . .

. . . The academy’s goal is to prepare students for the often conflicting roles that lawyers face in simultaneously serving clients, the legal system, and their own sense of integrity. . .

. . . [U]ntil about a decade ago, most classes [on ethics] tended to focus almost exclusively on the professional code that governs the minimum standards of behavior below which no lawyer may fall without being subject to discipline. Professionalism, by contrast, connotes the heights to which lawyers should aspire.

. . . “We’re not trying to impose values,” says David Hall, Dean of the Northeastern University School of Law, “but to say, ‘Don’t leave your values . . . at the door, because we need them. We’re convinced they make you a better lawyer.’”

The focus on the new professionalism – the idea that there should be more to lawyering than maximizing profit – is driven by sharp disdain for lawyers in American culture and by the personal dissatisfaction within the bar’s ranks. The collective impression is that lawyers have turned a profession distinguished by a mandate to serve the public good into one marked by crass commercialism and by the mores of a nasty market. Applications for law schools have dropped by nearly a third since 1990.

. . . Many courses on professionalism recognize that the problems besetting young lawyers are not just ethical in nature. Professional satisfaction is also an important theme. The course at Northeastern . . . was devised to help stem burnout among young lawyers. It aims to help students incorporate into their careers the ideals that led them to attend law school in the first place.

. . . For [Amber] Miller and others in the class, the learning retreat . . . was meant to train them “to be comfortable with being uncomfortable,” says Helen Fouhey, who led

the weekend course. “Some of the questions they were dealing with don’t necessarily have clean answers.” That’s the challenge lawyers face. While they arguably have never had more influence in shaping society . . . , they’ve never been less confident about how to define the values of the profession. Within the safety of a classroom, courses like Northeastern’s help students clarify who they want to be as lawyers.

All of which simply makes the point that doing the exercises which follow can be well worth the effort. The exercises alone may not be enough. In fact, for most of you, they will be no more than a start.

But it is important that you start. And I bet that, even if you do not have the polished finished product by the time you are done, you will at least have a good start, and you will know more clearly than you do right now what your insides believe is important.

And I close this introduction to the work you will now undertake with a passage that reminds us of what life is truly about.

“This is the true joy in life. Of being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one. Of being a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and that, as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live.

I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me. It’s a sort of splendid torch that I’ve got to hold up for the moment. And I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

George Bernard Shaw

EXERCISES

Part One: Allow Ten Minutes

1. Instructions¹:

For each value listed below, circle the number that best reflects the relative importance of that value to you. Pretend that the first number that pops into your head is “the right answer”, quickly circle it, then move on. The numbers have the corresponding meanings:

1. Extremely Important
2. Very Important
3. Important
4. Not important.

ACHIEVEMENT (a sense of accomplishment, success or contribution)	1	2	3	4
AMBITIOUS (aspiring to promotion or progress within a career)	1	2	3	4
ADVENTURE (new and challenging experiences)	1	2	3	4
AFFECTION (love, caring)	1	2	3	4
BEAUTY (aesthetics in nature, art or life)	1	2	3	4
BROAD MINDED (open-minded)	1	2	3	4
CHEERFUL (joyful)	1	2	3	4
CLEAN (tidy, sanitary)	1	2	3	4
COMPETENT (capable, effective)	1	2	3	4
COMPETITIVENESS (winning, taking risks)	1	2	3	4
COMFORTABLE LIFE (prosperous or easy life)	1	2	3	4

¹ Professor Milton Rokeach, in “The Nature Of Human Values”, identified a list of values, beliefs and personal characteristics. The list which here appears is based upon the list Professor Rokeach came up with.

COOPERATION (working well with others, teamwork)	1	2	3	4
COURAGEOUS (standing up for beliefs)	1	2	3	4
CREATIVITY (being imaginative, innovative)	1	2	3	4
DISCIPLINED (self-controlled, restrained)	1	2	3	4
ECONOMIC SECURITY (steady, adequate income)	1	2	3	4
EQUALITY (egalitarianism in life, equal opportunity for all)	1	2	3	4
EXCITING LIFE (a stimulating or challenging life)	1	2	3	4
FAME (being famous, well known)	1	2	3	4
FAMILY HAPPINESS (nuclear and/or extended family that is happy)	1	2	3	4
FAMILY SECURITY (nuclear and/or extended family that is safe)	1	2	3	4
FORGIVING (willing to forget a judgment of others)	1	2	3	4
FREEDOM (independence, autonomy, free choice, self reliant)	1	2	3	4
FRIENDSHIP (close relationships, companionship)	1	2	3	4
HAPPINESS (contentedness)	1	2	3	4
HEALTH (being physically and mentally well)	1	2	3	4
HELPFULNESS (assisting others, improving society)	1	2	3	4
INNER HARMONY (being at peace with your self)	1	2	3	4
INTEGRITY (honesty, sincerity, genuineness)	1	2	3	4
INVOLVEMENT (participating with others, belonging)	1	2	3	4
INTELLECTUAL (conceptual, abstract or symbolic)	1	2	3	4
LOGICAL (rational)	1	2	3	4
LOVING (affectionate, tender)	1	2	3	4
LOYALTY (duty, respectfulness, obedience)	1	2	3	4

MATURE LOVE (sexual and spiritual intimacy)	1	2	3	4
NATIONAL SECURITY (protection from attack)	1	2	3	4
ORDER (tranquillity, stability, conformity)	1	2	3	4
PEACE (a world at peace, without war or conflict)	1	2	3	4
PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT (personal growth)	1	2	3	4
PLEASURE (fun, laughs, an enjoyable, leisurely life style)	1	2	3	4
POLITE (courteous, well-mannered)	1	2	3	4
POWER (control, authority, influence over others)	1	2	3	4
RECOGNITION (social recognition, respect from others, status)	1	2	3	4
RELIGION (strong religious beliefs)	1	2	3	4
RESPONSIBLE (dependable, reliable)	1	2	3	4
SALVATION (eternal peace)	1	2	3	4
SELF-RESPECT (self-esteem, pride, sense of personal identity)	1	2	3	4
WEALTH (making money, getting rich)	1	2	3	4
WISDOM (understanding life, discovering knowledge)	1	2	3	4

Part Two: Allow Five Minutes

2. Values you identified as “Very Important” (i.e. #2) above are:

3. Values you identified as “Extremely Important” (i.e. #1) above are:

Part Four: Allow Five Minutes

9. Complete the following sentence:

My mission is to apply my gifts
(which are _____, _____, and _____)²
in advancing that which I deeply value
(_____, _____, and _____)³
in the service of⁴

² See your responses to Item 5 above.

³ See your responses to Item 6 above.

⁴ Consider your responses to Item 3 above. Consider, too, persons or groups you deeply desire to serve and/or causes or ideals you deeply wish to advance.

Part Five: Allow Five Minutes

10. Now state what it is your mission in life to do by completing the following sentence

I am here to

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