

The Island of Misfit Lawyers

BY J. RYANN PEYTON



I consider myself an “accidentallawyer.” I attended law school seeking the degree but not the profession. My plan was to be the next Clarice Starling and use my law degree to support a future career with the FBI’s behavior analysis unit. As it turns out, becoming an FBI Special Agent is a challenging career path, so instead of heading off to Quantico, I found myself in Denver attempting to find a professional identity in a profession I thought I was bypassing entirely.

As a first-generation lawyer, I didn’t know what I was getting myself into, but I believed that I would eventually find myself in the work and among the people. I arrived into the profession and glanced around expectantly only to realize that I couldn’t find myself anywhere. I felt like something was missing, and I quickly became aware of all the ways I simply didn’t fit.

For the better part of a decade, I tried my best to contort myself into the “lawyer” and “professional” that I thought I was supposed

to be. Despite my best efforts, however, I went home most days feeling like a misfit. I didn’t belong in the courtroom. I didn’t belong in an office 20 stories above 17th Street. I didn’t belong at the cocktail parties and networking events. I didn’t even belong in the clothes I wore every day to work. I simply couldn’t contort myself out of the truth: this profession wasn’t built for me.

So, what’s a legal misfit to do? I tried my hardest to quit and leave a profession that didn’t seem to want me in it. But every time I took a step toward the exit, something kept pulling me back. Maybe, I thought, we’re all misfits in our own ways. What if this isn’t a party of one but a party of many? What if the profession could embrace its rebels rather than repel them? And so, I began looking to build my own islands of misfit lawyers—places for the loners, the rebels, the empaths, the cynical optimists, the productive narcissists, the misunderstood, and the ones who feel like they simply aren’t seen, heard, or valued by the culture of the traditional legal profession.

Over time I realized that Colorado’s legal community has many self-proclaimed misfits,

each of them seeking community, opportunity, and authenticity. Together, we form places of refuge, small islands, where those who don’t fit the mold can find belonging. For those who embrace their misfit identity, most days on the island are great. We hold space for everyone, we confront our mistakes, we acknowledge our fears and preconceptions, and we value the humanity of the people in our community. Perhaps we can all learn something from the misfits in our community—especially in the areas of our work, where so many lawyers struggle to maintain authenticity and joy.

Professional Power and Control

Misfits in the law are not only not understood—they are often misunderstood entirely. The culture of the legal profession creates a paradigm in which those who don’t fit the mold cannot be seen, heard, or valued authentically. Instead, misfits are understood through the lens of their differences, not their contributions. This level of misunderstanding can lead to intense power struggles, as the profession must find balance in the forces of traditionalists and outsiders alike.

Traditional norms of the legal profession want you to believe that control is what power looks like. It's not. There are two very basic truths of existence: (1) we are not perfect, and (2) we are not, ultimately, in control. The law makes us believe that we must or can be in control at all times. Nothing could be further from the truth. The misfits in our profession understand and embrace this sentiment. Misfits don't seek power and control. We work to further belonging, innovation, and transformation of ourselves and the profession. The misfits understand that power is not found in controlling other people—it is found in controlling yourself.

Worthiness and Humanity

Quite often it is the misfit who has the ability and strength to vulnerably express concerns, opposition, or the hunger for systemic change. In the wrong space, such disruption can be met with swift condemnation and scapegoating. This result is unsurprising, as a temperament for change can be most unwelcome in the toxic systems that exist in the profession. What is more troubling, however, are the ways in which the worth and humanity of a misfit can be swiftly undercut through cruel and personal attacks.

Outrage culture in the legal profession satisfies our need for social solidarity. Expressing anger serves the psychological purpose of affirming one's commitment to the group or the community. Outrage and othering allow us to form social bonds by combatting perceived enemies. These events become litmus tests to see who is really on our side or a part of our group.

While disagreements can and do arise in the legal profession, misfits see the humanity in each individual, respect and value differences, and treat others with the respect that they want to receive from others. We seek social solidarity through solutions, not through manufactured outrage about exaggerated crises.

Resiliency and Authenticity

Many misfits hold identities different from the dominant white, able-bodied, Western, heterosexual, middle class, cisgender norms of the legal profession. But we are expected to monitor and adapt our presentation to approximate as closely as possible accepted norms

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in the profession. This conscious awareness that an unmonitored, authentic self will clash with professional norms and the continuous, conscious effort to recognize and avoid conforming to “unprofessional” stereotypes results in significant time, energy, and effort across professional spaces. This constant effort can be exhausting.

The misfits of the profession recognize the challenges of forced assimilation in the legal profession, frequently promulgated under the guise of inclusion, and seek to remedy its impact wherever possible. It is in holding space for difference that legal misfits embrace authenticity and adversity. So much is said in our profession about the importance of grit and resilience in overcoming setbacks. Misfits don't just commend people for being resilient—they redesign the systems of the profession that inherently make people suffer.

A Misfit's Answer to What We Owe Each Other

I take great pride in my identity as a legal misfit—an identity that I think is tolerated by most in the spirit of professionalism and civility. But as I continue to contemplate the question of what we owe each other in our legal community, I wonder: Is professionalism really all we owe each other? In this adversarial profession, the bar association is one of the only sacred spaces where we can see one another not as enemies but as teammates. As any former athlete can attest, civility and professionalism can only take a team so far. It is trust and love for one another that leads teams to success. Maybe what we

owe each other is something more than civility. Perhaps what we owe each other is love.

So, what gets in the way? We have this bar, this container where we can lean into connection and take off the personas and costumes of our professional battles. Yet even in this space we struggle to love, to give grace, and to trust. Even in this container we engage as adversaries. We eat our own. And we remain obligated to the tenets of our profession that require us to be exhausted, pejorative, isolated, and polarized at all times. When we operate solely from a place of adversarial exhaustion, we can't actually think generatively or act innovatively to make this profession a place where everyone can belong and succeed. The misfits think we can do better. We believe that in this unique space we can choose to reject the professional forces that drive us apart. Maybe what we owe each other is radical resistance.

If you haven't figured it out yet, we misfits ultimately want to raise a little hell. If we see something that isn't working toward the highest and best purpose of the profession, we are going to call it out. That doesn't mean we always get it right. But we don't believe in letting perfection be the enemy of progress, and where we need to have hard conversations, we absolutely will. So perhaps what we owe each other is honesty.

In the spirit of love, resistance, and honesty, I invite you to embrace your inner misfit and join in the work of creating professional communities and cultures where everyone can thrive. After all, discovering your unique gifts is part of what makes this journey worth the effort. Welcome to the island! 