

The Long Way Home

Why Professional Excellence in Law Is About Returning to Yourself

BY RYANN PEYTON



When Odysseus finally returns to Ithaca after 20 years, he does not arrive in triumph. Instead, he appears disguised as a beggar, unrecognized by his own family and compelled to prove his identity not through credentials or past achievements, but through his enduring character despite the forces seeking to reshape him. This image, the accomplished professional rendered invisible, testing whether the core self has survived the journey, provides the legal profession with a much-needed vocabulary for the concept of return.

The Myth We Tell Legal Professionals: Achievement as Forward Motion

The culture of the legal profession is characterized by the language of ascent. Common

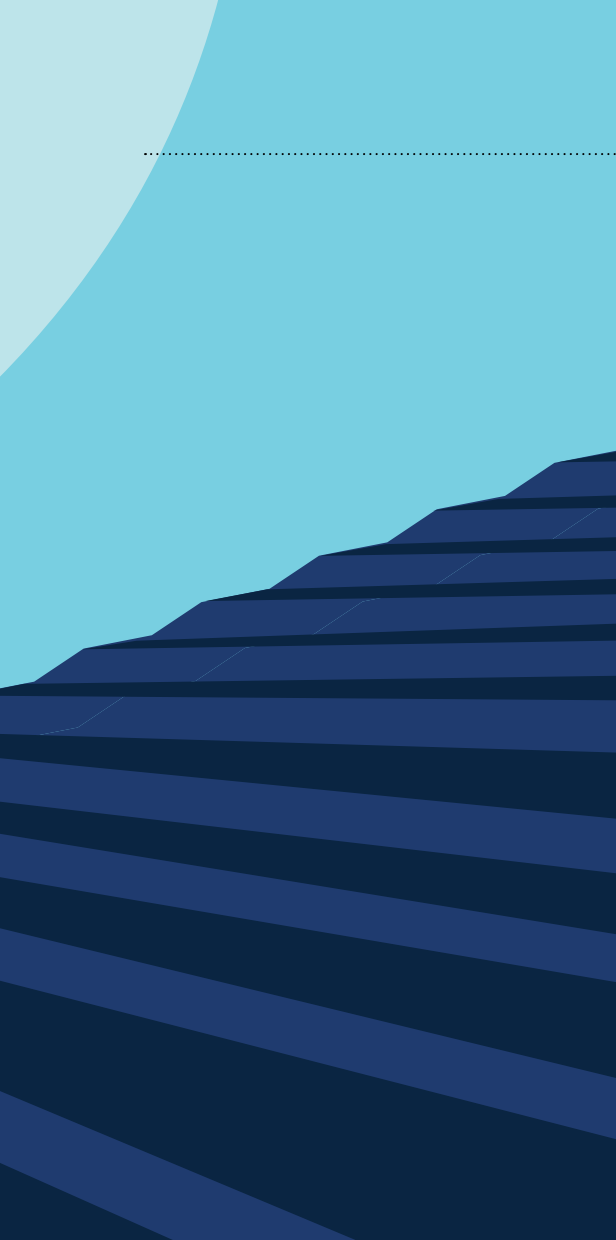
expressions like “making partner,” “landing the case,” “building a practice,” and “advancing the profession” reflect directional and cumulative metaphors. As Professor Deborah Rhode observed in her examination of legal professionalism, the profession measures success primarily through “external rewards: income, status, and power,” fostering a culture in which “getting ahead” is equated with professional worth.¹ There is minimal language, and even less institutional support, for concepts akin to return.

“The Odyssey” is a homecoming story, not a conquest, and that distinction is important. Odysseus’s prowess lies beyond what he found in battle at Troy, where he clashed with men of comparable competence. Instead, his highest test is the long struggle to return and to make his way to Ithaca still familiar to those who knew

him. The road home, with its delays and moral quagmires, becomes the measure of success.

Legal professionals encounter a similar odyssey, though it is seldom articulated explicitly: How can one’s identity remain preserved across a legal career?

When lawyers move through a professional ladder that is structured to reinforce competencies such as adversarial aggression, strategic opacity, and emotional detachment, the issue becomes ever-more urgent. As the legal ethics scholar David Luban has recognized, lawyers often contend with “role differentiation” that pits personal morality against career duty and which he calls a “moral schizophrenia.”² If individuals are unable to acknowledge these pressures, without a system for securing the fundamental aspects of their identity, their career progress can produce irreversible change.



danger is not dramatic corruption but gentle accommodation—the gradual forgetting of where one came from.

Circe and Calypso represent a different threat: success that is alluring but fundamentally misaligned. Both goddesses provide Odysseus with versions of immortality, comfort, and power. And both imply roles in which his competence is rewarded and his physical needs met. But they both involve renouncing the identity that he is attempting to protect. These episodes resonate with legal careers that reward technical excellence while quietly reshaping the legal professional's values and sense of purpose: a partner who excels at defending corporate malfeasance while losing sight of why she entered law, or an advocate so skilled at adversarial combat that he can no longer collaborate with colleagues. Just as if Odysseus had stayed with Calypso, for these legal professionals, the work succeeds but the person disappears.

Perhaps most striking is the beggar's disguise Odysseus must adopt when he reaches Ithaca. After everything that he has survived, he arrives stripped of visible status, unrecognized by former comrades, obliged to prove himself without title or reputation. The scene dramatizes what many legal professionals experience but rarely discuss: seasons when excellence is invisible, when reputational capital is interrupted, when the only thing that matters is whether the core identity has survived the journey. As Professor Patrick Schiltz observed in his influential article on legal ethics, “the money, the competition, [and] the status” can become so central to a lawyer's identity that periods without these markers feel like professional death—even when they offer opportunities for recalibration.⁴

Returning to Yourself Requires Returning to Others

Odysseus's homecoming does not end when he steps onto Ithaca's shore. His true return requires him to reestablish norms, repair a household corrupted by his absence, and make himself recognizable to those who matter. He must prove, primarily to Penelope, that he remains the person she married despite 20 years of war, survival, and moral compromise. The image offers legal culture a provocation: Can the legal professional

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still belong to colleagues, family, friends, and the broader world after the work is done?

In law practice, especially in litigation and high-stakes practice areas, adopting adversarial personas and maintaining strategic emotional distance are often required. These aren't personality defects; they are simply the professional adaptations that, in some cases, can be the art of effective representation. But, as research on lawyer well-being makes clear, such adaptations can take the form of habit and survive environments where they actively undermine relationships and a lawyer's potential for non-adversarial engagement.⁵ The litigator who cross-examines family members at dinner; the partner who treats associates as opposing counsel; the former prosecutor who cannot stop seeing civilians as potential defendants—these are failures of homecoming.

The Long Way Home Is the Point

Odysseus's detours are structured tests of identity under conditions designed to erode it. Every island constitutes a different kind of exit from the self, and what is exceptional about Odysseus is his capacity to “selectively resist” the lure of depersonalization.

Take the Lotus-Eaters, whose flower leads to forgetting. Odysseus's men who taste it forsake any desire to go home. The plant doesn't so much injure them as dissolve their sense of a place to return. This episode is representative of professional environments that erase identity for the sake of comfort, belonging, or status. As Professor William Simon has described, institutional settings can create “a culture of compliance” where “lawyers defer to organizational goals and norms” in ways that gradually “erode professional independence and judgment.”³ The

Professional excellence, properly understood, includes the capacity to reintegrate into the profession and the broader world without importing the corrosive habits learned in survival mode. This requires what psychologists call “code-switching,” the ability to shift behavioral norms based on context. But it also requires maintaining enough core continuity that the switching does not fracture one’s identity entirely. As legal scholars have noted, this kind of integration is not instinctive but learned, and the profession provides virtually no training in it.⁶ The question is not whether legal professionals should adapt to demanding roles. The question is whether they can return from them.

Why the Legal Profession Struggles With Homecoming

Law trains people to argue, to win, and to endure. These are genuine competencies,

essential to zealous advocacy. But as Professor Lawrence Krieger’s empirical research on lawyer satisfaction demonstrates, legal education and professional socialization actively undermine other capacities like emotional intelligence, collaborative problem-solving, and ethical integration.⁷ The result is a profession that produces excellent advocates but struggles to help those advocates remain whole people.

More specifically, law does not train people to:

- **Return from adversarial intensity.** Legal culture treats high-conflict work as a permanent state rather than a temporary role. There are no structured transitions to help legal professionals move from litigation to transactional work, from criminal prosecution to policy, or from advocacy to teaching. The assumption is that professional skills are fungible and the lawyer’s internal state is irrelevant.

But as research on moral injury among lawyers suggests, prolonged exposure to adversarial systems can create lasting psychological and ethical effects that do not simply disappear when the case closes.⁸

- **Transition between professional identities.** A physician transitioning to family practice from emergency medicine trains differently, works in different settings, and is meant to develop different relational skills. Law presumes that a lawyer is a lawyer—that the abilities necessary for criminal defense are fundamentally the same as those necessary for estate planning; that the habits developed in Big Law litigation easily translate to practice in a solo capacity or with a public interest issue. The erosion of this distinction has left more than a few lawyers with what some call professional vertigo when they become professionals in a different capacity.
- **Repair professional culture after periods of stress.** Legal workplaces often undergo periods of intense pressure—major litigation, leadership transitions, economic crisis—that temporarily alter institutional norms. Civility erodes. Corners get cut. Trust breaks down. When the crisis passes, there is rarely any structured effort to restore what was lost. The expectation is simply to move forward, carrying forward the damage as normal. The result, as the National Task Force on Lawyer Well-Being documented, is a profession rich in achievement and poor in restoration rituals.⁹ We know how to celebrate winning. We have no idea how to mark the return to ordinary practice, the reintegration of the self, or the repair of damaged professional relationships. We have partner announcements but no homecoming ceremonies.

Excellence as a Collective Obligation

Odysseus does not return alone: Athena provides strategic guidance and physical disguise, Penelope creates the tests that prove identity, and Telemachus shares the work of defending

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their home. Homecoming, in Homer's telling, is not an individual achievement but a collaborative restoration requiring institutional support.

Legal culture tends to frame professional integrity as individual responsibility. This perspective, though not totally off base, overlooks how professional identity is institutionally shaped and maintained. As Professor Eli Wald has argued in his work on legal professionalism, "individual lawyers cannot be expected to sustain professional values in isolation from institutional support."¹⁰ When law firms reward billable hours over pro bono service, when courts tolerate incivility from repeat players, when regulators fail to meaningfully discipline ethical violations, the message is clear: the institution does not actually value the homecoming.

If professional excellence includes the capacity to return to oneself, to core values, and to genuine community, then institutions must create conditions that make return possible. This might include:

- **Normalizing reentry after intense roles.**

Law firms and legal organizations might create structured transitions for legal professionals moving from high-conflict practice areas. This could include mentorship, reduced caseloads, and explicit discussion of the psychological and ethical recalibration need to support such a move. The Special Forces community, which faces analogous challenges in helping soldiers transition from combat to civilian life, has developed sophisticated reintegration programs.¹¹ The legal profession has barely considered such a tool.

- **Rewarding ethical continuity, not just output.** Current metrics for professional success—billable hours, settlements won, clients secured—measure productivity but not integrity. As Professor Susan Saab Fortney has argued, law firms need evaluative frameworks that assess "whether lawyers maintain their professional identity and values over time," particularly during periods of stress.¹² This could include 360-degree reviews

that assess relational capacity, ethics audits that examine decision-making, or sabbatical structures that allow for periodic recalibration.


- **Creating structures to help legal professionals come home.** This could mean ethics roundtables where legal professionals discuss the gradual drifts that accumulate into identity loss. It could mean formal mentoring programs pairing junior lawyers with senior practitioners who have successfully navigated career transitions. It could mean institutional recognition that some roles are temporary by design and that moving away from them is professional growth, not failure.

Conclusion: Redefining Excellence

The legal profession needs a new understanding of professional excellence—one that asks not only how far a lawyer can go, but also whether they can come back. Back to the values that drew them to law. Back to enduring relationships. Back to a version of professional identity that

can coexist with other aspects of being human. Back to a practice that serves justice rather than merely performing competence.

This idea is not soft thinking. It is recognition that the adversarial system, like Odysseus's journey, is not meant to be permanent residence. Legal professionals must enter it, do the work required, and then—crucially—leave it behind when the work is done. The lawyer who cannot make that transition, who carries trial combat into every interaction, and who has so thoroughly internalized adversarial norms that collaboration becomes impossible has not achieved excellence. They have become lost.

The highest form of professional excellence, then, is not how far a legal career travels but whether the lawyer can come back ethically grounded, relationally capable, and worthy of trust. Not unscathed, because the work leaves marks. Not unchanged, because growth is inevitable. But recognizable and still connected to the reasons they began. In that sense, the long way home is not a detour from excellence. It is excellence. 



J. Ryann Peyton is the director of the Colorado Office of Attorney Professional Excellence and a seasoned consultant and advocate on equity and civility in the legal field. Before joining APEX, Peyton focused their law practice on complex civil litigation.

NOTES

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