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The Destruction of Young Lawyers: Beyond One L

Douglas Litowitz
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Lawyers are a profoundly miserable lot. They are overworked, depressed, and unfulfilled, and most say that, in retrospect, they wish they had chosen another profession.

The downward spiral begins in law school, where the “Socratic method” more often humiliates than stimulates learning, and where students tenaciously compete for grades in order to land the most “desirable” jobs, only to find those jobs enormously demanding and even masochistic. The typical young lawyer is overwhelmed by the pressures of billable hour quotas, family obligations, and more than $80,000 in school loans to repay. As they work an incredible amount of hours in a legal field which is far more profit-driven business than scholarly profession, young lawyers quickly grow unhappy and filled with self-loathing.

The author describes lawyers as: “caught in a deadly cycle of worrying about attracting clients, trying to bill a superhuman number of hours, keeping one step ahead of tricky lawyers on the other side, and feeling paranoid about being sued for malpractice. Being a lawyer is like walking in quicksand through a war zone, thick and groping, with a veneer of fake civility caked over the entire process. Almost by accident, one adopts a mindset that is frightening and alienating, and one no longer recognizes oneself.”

All is not lost, however. Litowitz is a law professor and former young lawyer who found himself as disaffected and bitter as his peers, and this excellent book re-examines the entire legal practice, including law school, the bar exam, billing practices, even technological advances (which, paradoxically, have not eased lawyers’ burden at all but have served to increase their workload and daily anxiety). He challenges all the paradigms in the legal field by pointing out the problems with each area and offering alternatives to “business as usual.” For example, he advocates changing law school at its core by eliminating the Socratic method so sadistically employed by Professor Kingsfield in *The Paper Chase*, so that law school is a more positive experience and students learn more practical skills.

“Without question,” the author avers, “every step of the current regime needs to be fundamentally changed,” and his reasons for reforming the profession are compelling. Though that is a daunting and overwhelming task, it is a challenge that all lawyers need to meet in order to prevent the ongoing destruction of young lawyers.

All practicing attorneys should read this book, so that a discussion can begin in earnest to change the way lawyers are educated, are trained, and practice. All college students who are contemplating law school definitely owe it to themselves to read this book so that they either enter the legal field with eyes wide open or choose another livelihood.

ALAN J. COUTURE (August 18, 2009)

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