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Scott Holmes: Lawyering, the Quaker way

A Durham lawyer says his faith changed the course of his career, transforming his legal practice into a vocation -- a true calling filled with joy, integrity and love.

by [Scott Holmes](#)



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It's no secret that for many lawyers today, legal practice is a miserable existence. With high rates of depression and substance abuse and a suicide rate reportedly higher than in many other fields, lawyers can struggle to find meaning, clarity and joy in their work.

As a trial lawyer, specializing in criminal defense and civil trials, I know the stress and pressures inherent in the legal profession. I have experienced them myself, and I have seen the damage they can cause in my colleagues -- and, earlier in my career, the damage they caused me.

[Lawyers](#) are asked to carry virtually alone the most difficult problems of our clients. Various codes of professional conduct discourage and even prohibit lawyers from talking about their clients' problems except in the most limited circumstances -- generally, in meetings with opposing attorneys.

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Clients expect their attorneys to produce a near-magical outcome from what are almost always horrible circumstances. And, as in most other professions today, new technologies have made the volume of work -- information to be collected and shared, communications to be made among multiple parties, conferences to be held -- grow like an avalanche. Legal practice now moves at a pace that would have been unimaginable a generation ago.

But those are just the superficial trappings of lawyering today. At a deeper level, the legal profession requires lawyers to wear masks and armor that distance us from our clients and dehumanize both us and them. Our clients are "defendants" or "plaintiffs." Their problems are "cases" to be "disposed" or "settled."

In a profoundly adversarial system, lawyers often have to make difficult, even questionable, choices. Eventually, if not sustained and nurtured by other resources, if not offered other models and ways of practice, lawyers can find that their professional masks become emotional and moral prisons.

As a Quaker, I found such a resource and a model in my faith. It seems obvious now, but it wasn't always clear to me that my faith could shape how I practice law. Fortunately, I realized many years ago that my faith and my profession were not separate realms. My spiritual practice as a Quaker changed the course of my career, transforming my legal practice into a vocation, into a true calling.

I did not always feel that way. Just out of law school, I worked as a public defender -- and within months of starting, was profoundly depressed. I was drowning in the deep end, ill-equipped to handle either my clients' legal issues or the complex and overwhelming social circumstances in which they found themselves.

After leaving the public defender's office to start my own practice, I began handling some civil litigation in addition to my criminal cases. But even then, when litigating over money and property, I sometimes found myself an instrument of interests that I didn't agree with.

I was a hired gun. The long hours spent preparing and trying a case and the high stakes that were riding on my skills as a lawyer -- from money to an individual's freedom or even life -- created great stress. Practicing law put tremendous pressure on my marriage and made me emotionally unavailable to my children.

But slowly, I began to realize that as a Quaker, I was called to a different way of legal practice. My Quaker faith is grounded in a belief that there is something of the Divine within each person. From that flows a belief in radical equality, generosity, peace, integrity and the importance of a loving and inclusive community. Though they're not usually associated with the legal profession, I found myself wondering whether these core beliefs could indeed reshape the way I practice law.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that my faith could guide my path as a lawyer. My Quaker beliefs were not essential just to my home life but to how I practice law.

Integrity, for example, is central to Quaker practice -- and to the law. For Quakers, integrity means more than telling the truth and being honorable and trustworthy. It also means being "integrated" -- being a whole person. Integrity rejects the fragmentation of professional lives. Integrity means discerning my most central values and living them in the world, however difficult that might be.

Jesus taught me that the most central value is love. And so for me, as a Quaker lawyer, integrity requires me to take off my professional mask and experience and share in the suffering of my clients, my opponents, and everyone else caught up in the conflicts that I try to help resolve. In a legal practice shaped by Quaker values of integrity, I no longer keep a professional distance but bring my whole self to the whole situation. What previously were "conflicts" to be "disposed" are now opportunities for healing and deeper community.

Equality is another Quaker practice that helped me rethink my life as a lawyer. We are all children of God, with a divine spark in our hearts -- even my clients who are charged with murder. This deep belief in equality has helped me escape some of the unhealthy hierarchical and demeaning behaviors that often characterize my profession and the justice system.

I see God at work not only in my poor client but also in the judge, the prosecutor, the bailiff, the clerk of court and the juror. I am no better and no worse than any of them. We are all human beings struggling to figure out how to handle difficult conflicts together. We are in a community together,

trying to figure out hard things.

This more holistic way of practicing law is liberating me from the prison of my professional mask. In my work as a trial lawyer, I experience the loving presence of God as I serve my clients, who are caught in a demeaning system that aims to take their freedom or resources.

I represent all kinds of people -- drug addicts, immigrants, people who are homeless, people charged with a variety of crimes, including murder. Even my most "hardened" clients are afraid, lost, remorseful and in great need. All of them have the spark.

In my Quaker-shaped practice of law, I am not only their advocate; I am their guide, walking with them on their journey. Through them and in my relationship with them, I meet God. I share information and develop choices to help them make the decision between bad and worse. I am their guide, their counselor, their advocate and, when necessary, their fighter.

Thanks to this more spiritual approach to practicing law, I now begin each day with joy, opening a space for the Divine to work in my life and to help me be an instrument of love and compassion. I am less weighed down by pressure, by attachment to outcomes and by the suffering around me.

The suffering, of course, is still there. But rather than distance myself from it, I embrace it. I "suffer with" -- I have compassion for -- my clients. This shared suffering itself is redemptive and helps awaken me to community, the kingdom here and now.

My teacher and guide, Jesus, ended his time as a criminal, tried and convicted, crucified on a cross, along with two other criminals. He cultivated loving relationships with thieves, prostitutes and outcasts. He taught in his life the healing and transformative power of suffering sacrificial service. As strange as it might sound, my work -- my calling -- as a lawyer is to follow a similar path.

As a Quaker lawyer, I am called to make my work the loving of the world by serving folks in trouble. When I fail, it isn't because I didn't keep the right professional distance but because I have not loved enough. It is because I have not brought love into the world. My spiritual path has helped transform what was for me a miserable profession into a calling, one that wraps me in a tapestry of community and Spirit.