



CALLED TO BE A LAWYER

What does the world believe about work? Here are three quotes to consider:

Drew Carey: “Oh, you hate your job? Why didn’t you say so? There’s a support group for that. It’s called EVERYBODY, and they meet at the bar.”

Robert Mondavi: “Find a job you love, and you’ll never have to work a day in your life.”

Dorothy Sayers: “Work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do.”

One of my favorite authors is Harvard professor and social scientist Arthur Brooks, whose many columns, books, and videos explore the nature of happiness. He says happiness is one part genes, one part circumstances, and one part habits. Although we have scant control over the first two parts, we have enormous control over habits. Specifically, Dr. Brooks lists the four key areas in which our choices and beliefs make or break our sense of life satisfaction: faith, family, community, and work.

Work? Well, yes. While most of us intuitively appreciate how we are shaped by spiritual values, our family tree, and the broader community whom we nurture and who nurtures us, the role of work may deserve more attention.¹ Americans who feel successful at work² are twice as likely to say they are “very happy” overall. Why, then, do studies consistently list lawyers among the professions with lowest life satisfaction? More on that later.

I didn’t expect to be a lawyer. My first career was as a business consultant with a prestigious firm, a job obtained in large part by college connections. I discovered I was good at it because the gifts I had were aligned with the job, and I enjoyed the routine: meeting with clients, defining problems, researching, reviewing potential solutions, preparing proposals, educating clients, and then implementing a plan. Within a couple of years, however, I was dissatisfied serving only corporations. I had no direct connection to the people whose lives were actually affected. How could I use my newly realized gifts for individuals? Slowly the answer emerged: estate planning lawyer. So, hello law school, an extra year for a master’s degree in estate planning, and a new career with Knoxville law firm Egerton McAfee.

Forty-six years later, I can say that I have felt privileged to be a lawyer, I have a high sense of life satisfaction, and I know why.

1. Estate planning is my calling. “Calling” may imply accountability and faithfulness to something outside ourselves, but Dorothy Sayers³ argues that it is also inherent in our human nature. She believes all legitimate work should be seen as a vocation or calling, such that (a) everyone is called to use their skills or talents to serve others, which in turn fulfills their own potential, and (b) work should be done well, for its own sake, with integrity and craftsmanship, respecting both the work itself and the end user of the product or service, which in turn blesses us. By specializing in helping clients plan for life transitions, I have been privileged to join many others in their life journeys. I have held hands of the grieving, walked with folks through their difficult times, and helped bring peace of mind to folks confused and burdened by the legal system in setting their affairs in order. In other words, I became a counselor-at-law in the fullest sense, a role I have relished.

2. I had great mentors. My lawyer mentors were several of my senior law partners, but especially Bill Davis, Sr., a lion of the Knoxville Bar, whose values and practices became patterns to emulate. Another mentor was

Bob Ferguson, then the senior minister at First Presbyterian Church, whose emphasis on being a “good and faithful servant” instilled a priceless perspective.

3. I have often had opportunities to counsel clients about the hard truths of life. The old adage is true that life’s only certainties are death and taxes, and my clients and I address both head-on. Reality bites, but meaning and purpose may come to us from facing truth squarely and finding redemptive purpose even in things gone awry.

4. Estate planning allows me to control my own schedule as well as any specialty could, reducing stress and helping me avoid giving short shrift to faith, family, and community.

5. Estate planning clients are almost always good people trying to accomplish good things, the kind of clients we appreciate and who appreciate us. To them, we as lawyers primarily provide peace of mind that they are being good stewards, doing the right things for the people and causes they love most.

6. I have created, represented, or served on boards of a host of charities big and small, a singular privilege.

7. I regularly encounter all kinds of novel client situations that interest or challenge me, so work rarely seems routine. For example, one client buried several barrels of gold and silver bullion in his vast yard and brought me a treasure map where several X’s marked the spots. Sometimes I think, “You can’t make this stuff up.”

8. My law office surrounds me with collaborative and collegial colleagues. Who doesn’t love hanging out with bright and perceptive friends?

9. In other words, I have found voluntary human labor to be at the center of most human life, a gift to all of us to help us fulfill our highest and noblest aspirations. We shed the notion of being slaves to money or power in order to become who we were meant to be, creative beings privileged to invest our gifts and talents into the broader community, perhaps for pay, often enough not. Work gives the worker dignity, discipline, and lifetime learning, while providing the world valuable services.

10. My perception of happiness changes with age, increasingly moving on from professional success to the deeper values of wisdom, mentoring, relationships, and service. The library of my brain may have a slower librarian, but there are enough volumes still available to serve those deeper values.

11. Arthur Brooks concludes his recent book *Strength to Strength* with the thought that the world tells you to love things, use people, and worship yourself. He proposes instead that we use things, love people, and worship God. For me, being a lawyer enables that.

Why do many lawyers struggle with career satisfaction? Perhaps it’s a misalignment between their daily work and true calling, since the law, as they say, is a jealous mistress. Likewise, unmanaged stress changes both the brain and the soul. I am not immune to stress, but I can testify that I love what I do and that has made all the difference.

¹ Any number of TED talks and YouTube videos feature Arthur Brooks on the subject of work in addition to other aspects of happiness.

² Here, success is defined as “earned success,” the thrill and joy of creative effort, measured by whatever currency is appropriate, e.g., clients served, dollars earned, children reared, lives saved, students taught, etc.

³ Dorothy Sayers, friend of C.S. Lewis, was an English author (e.g., the Lord Peter Wimsey novels), playwright, and religious commentator. Her essay “Why Work?” is a classic.