

# *Are You Unhappy as a Lawyer? You May Be Buying into the Wrong Narrative*

*By Harrison Barnes from Los Angeles Office Managing Director*

When my oldest daughter was four years old, she was attending a small preschool run out of the rental house of an aging hippie couple in Malibu, California.

While I was unclear why my wife decided to send our daughter to this school in lieu of more established preschools, I got some comfort from the fact that the school seemed to be somewhat well-regarded among the stars in the area. It was not uncommon running into Matthew McConaughey, Julia Roberts, rock stars, and other celebrities when I dropped my daughter off at school.

Nevertheless, something seemed off with the couple running the preschool. The interior of the preschool itself smelled like marijuana, sage, and incense. The kitchen was lined with all sorts of powders, vitamins, and potions--and if you asked about them (which I did on one occasion), the couple would launch into a lengthy monologue about the dangers of mainstream medicine and then try to sell you hundreds of dollars of vitamins. The couple spoke about alternative medicine, believed the government was intentionally poisoning people with chemtrails from jets, and had all sorts of conspiracy theories that they regularly shared with people. They had no televisions, very little furniture, and cushions spread throughout the house covered with South American quilts. Come to think of it, all of the stars must have liked them because the couple had no idea who they even were--they could have cared less who people were. They were so out of it that they hardly looked at people when they spoke with them. They were more likely to start talking about astrology out of the blue if someone mentioned their child was moody, rather than addressing the root of the issue--such as the child being hungry or tired.

The aging male hippie drove an early 1980s-era van that had shag carpet covering the entire interior of the van, even the roof. There was also a bed inside the van, which did not look like a good, safe place for children. Moreover, he drove it around Malibu at what seemed like way too slow of a speed, and it just looked weird. There were stickers on the back of the van about various social causes and a few that expressed extreme disdain for Republicans. The van exhaust was a little loud, a bit smoky, and if I were a policeman, I probably would have pulled him over just for being on the road. The man had too much facial hair, wore tie-dyed clothing, and almost always smelled like marijuana. After my daughter left the preschool, the man cut someone off on a canyon road in Malibu who plunged to their death. He subsequently disappeared and even his wife--who ran the preschool with him--said she did not know where he was. Since he probably was going 10 mph in a 50 mph zone, I'm guessing the person came up behind him and had to swerve to avoid hitting him.

Things started to go south at the preschool when the couple ran out of money somehow. In December of the preschool's last year of operation, the hippie woman approached all of the wealthier parents and told them she would give them a 50% discount on tuition for the next year if they gave her a check right then. As word spread about what seemed to be strange financial shenanigans, many parents looked for different options for their kids. A few gave her money and never saw it again. I was especially alarmed when the woman told me that an outside structure on the property they used for classes had been "red-tagged" for illegal construction and asked me for a loan of \$200,000 against the property--which I found out later she was renting and did not even own.

## **Preschoolers and the Power of Narratives**

The highlight of the last few months of the preschool's operation came when the parents of one of the students--the lead singer of the heavy metal band Korn, Jonathan Davis--decided to hold a benefit concert for the school to raise needed funds. At the concert, his porn star wife, Deven Davis (who ultimately died at age 39 of a drug overdose) got on stage and demanded that the woman who ran the preschool join her. . She proceeded to say something like this about the 65-year old hippie woman running the preschool: "We've got to raise money for this bitch! Let's all throw in some cash to help this old whore out so our kids can have a great preschool!"

**See the following articles for more information:**

[Keep Your Story Simple as an Attorney](#)

[Your Narrative: Explaining Your Lateral Moves](#)

To my astonishment, I looked around the audience packed in the Pepperdine University auditorium for the concert, and no one batted an eye. In fact, they were cheering. The aging hippie woman did not look uncomfortable either. A few weeks after that, one of the female parents at the preschool apparently filed charges against Deven Davis for stalking her like a peeping Tom. It was as if I was in an alternate universe of some sort.

A few months before the preschool suddenly closed for good--it would close without notice a few weeks before the end of the school year, leaving parents without a place to send their kids) --the school decided to hold a march on Greenpeace Day or a similar event to benefit the environment.

I took my daughter there on a Saturday morning, and she was shuttled inside as the parents stood in the backyard of this house, not knowing what was about to occur. When the children did emerge, they had giant signs that said things like "**BIG CORPORATIONS ARE EVIL! STOP KILLING OUR ENVIRONMENT!**" and similar statements.

Yet the most shocking thing happened when the preschool teacher led the children in a chant the likes of which even I could not believe: "**CORPORATE AMERICA IS KILLING US!**"

I should have realized that I was in the presence of Hollywood and rock-star types because when I looked around again, no one seemed to be flinching. I understand that some large corporations do bad things; however, these chants were being made by three, four and five-year-old children.

These young children were being indoctrinated into a narrative where large corporations were evil and killing the world. The parents in the neighborhood also seemed to share these beliefs--because no one acted as if there was anything unusual about this.

## Why Narratives Are a Necessity

It should have come as no surprise that over the next few years, my daughter seemed to believe that large corporations were evil. In her eyes, these companies were destroying the environment and world and had to be stopped. I did not tell her any of this. She developed a narrative because from the time she was three years old, and for the next few years, she was fed this information by her preschool. Even today, her narrative about the way the world works is based partly around this.

The same thing happened to me, growing up with drugs. My school district outside of Detroit put on anti-drug speeches and education programs several times a year from the time I was five years old. I had no idea what drugs were, but I sure as hell avoided them like the plague. I did not even use drugs in college, even though just about everyone I knew smoked pot. I thought drugs were evil and avoided them because I had a narrative about them--and I cared deeply about this narrative.

While the narratives about hating large corporations, Republicans, drugs, mainstream medicine, and more may not seem to relate to you, the truth is that they could not relate to you more. Everyone--yourself included--develops narratives about the way the world works and our place in it. Everyone takes sides of some sort and these narratives give us hope about better futures--something to believe in and give our lives purpose. We are Republicans, Democrats, Communists, educated, non-educated, for corporations, against corporations, believers in environmental destruction, or supporters of the environment. It does not really matter. We take sides and these sides give our lives meaning. We have a view of the world that is important to us.

The opposite of taking a side or having belief in something is complete apathy. If you have no belief in anything or no desire to change anything, you will often be depressed and believe that life is meaningless. The most depressed people believe that nothing is possible and feel no hope. Addiction, anxiety, and delusions are some of the ways that the mind tries to generate hope and positive meaning in the absence of a compelling narrative about life. In order to be happy and try to avoid these negative feelings, we must develop narratives about the world and our place and purpose in it.

### See the following articles for more information:

[Why Your Attorney Mind Self Sabotages Your Life and Career](#)

[Is there Any Point for Attorneys Working Their Tail Off Inside of Law Firms, Being Abused and Worrying About Career Security?](#)

Early in our lives, most of us develop narratives about our skills and abilities. We develop narratives about our bodies, our intelligence, our interests, and what we are good at. These narratives and what we believe often end up determining exactly what happens to us. We are constantly developing new and better narratives as we go through life about the purpose of what we are doing and where we want to go. Unless we are constantly developing new narratives, we never move forward.

### Surround Yourself with Positivity

I was talking to a recruiter from our firm today who told me about one of her candidates and how impressed she was with her. She said that the candidate had gone to a very poor high school near her own school, and she was amazed that this girl had managed to go to a good college, law school, and then law firm.

"What is so amazing about that?" I asked her.

"Well, no one from that school does well," she said. "Most of the kids in that high school drop out and do not even finish."

This is a perfect example of what happens when people in an environment are less likely to succeed because of the messages they receive from their peers in that environment. It is not that bad schools are bad--it is the people we are surrounded by in those schools who are negative. You can learn the same things at a community college as you can learn at Stanford, but you are going to be around different sorts of people. The people at Stanford are likely to be carrying around much better narratives of their future and what they are capable of doing--and they will share that positivity with you. Ultimately, everything is about narratives. If you surround yourself with people with positive narratives, you are more likely to be happy and successful than if you surround yourself with people with negative narratives.

### See the following articles for more information:

[Never underestimate the power of a positive attitude](#)

[How to Not Fail, Die or Go Crazy Practicing Law: How I've Seen Attorneys Find Enjoyment and Satisfaction in](#)

## the Legal Profession

Narratives define us and often end up determining the course of our lives. When we have strong narratives about ourselves, we are likely to achieve more. When we have negative narratives about ourselves, we are likely to achieve less. It is the same with being happy--in order to enjoy your life and career, it is important that you consistently maintain positive narratives about yourself. You cannot be happy if you look at the world in a negative way.

### How Narratives Can Define Your Legal Career

Whether it is going to the best law school or getting into the best law firm, ultimately what we are trying to do--and the entire point of it--is to surround ourselves with organizations that attract and limit themselves to people who have the best narratives. The best law firms and the people in them have different beliefs about what they are capable of, what their people are capable of, and what is acceptable and not acceptable than lesser law firms.

Lawyers all have narratives. Associates have narratives and partners have narratives. You have a narrative.

Inside most large law firms, there is a narrative that if you go in-house and get a job there, you will have fewer hours and be happy. There is a narrative among associates and many partners that working in a law firm is too unpleasant, too stressful, and not a great environment. [Attorneys collectively adopt this narrative--most of them--when they are in law school or, in most cases, very quickly after they arrive at their law firms.](#) This narrative does nothing more than make you unhappy, not fully committed, and likely to not succeed as an attorney. Incredibly, most people who fall victim to developing this narrative are the same people who managed to avoid negative narratives when they were growing up and working towards becoming attorneys.

### Negativity Kills Any Narrative

In order to be successful at anything, you need to become an expert at avoiding negative narratives. If you want to get good grades, you need to avoid the narrative of others that doing well in school is not worth it. If you want to be a good athlete, you need to avoid the narrative of others that practicing hard is not worth it. If you want to achieve a goal, you need to avoid the narrative of others that what you are seeking is impossible, you are not capable of it, or others will not like you if you try to achieve it.

The further we attempt to rise, the more others will attempt to define us with negative narratives and even get us to adopt these narratives about ourselves. If you look at the most successful politicians, others are always trying to define them with negative narratives--and vice versa. These narratives will pursue you. If you are going to be happy, you need to not only develop a good narrative for yourself--but avoid the negative narratives of others.

**See [Top 20 Mistakes Attorneys Make When Choosing to Look for and Accept New Jobs](#) for more information.**

In a more conservative neighborhood, the narrative that the hippie preschool operators had developed for themselves and the rest of the world never would have worked. No one would send their kids to the school, and these people would have been outcasts. The parents who flocked to the hippie preschool would have been outcasts as well. While Deven Davis could call the preschool teacher a bitch and a whore without anyone flinching, this behavior would have been met with extreme social ostracism in other areas--so would being a porn star. However, in a world with alternate narratives, all of this was considered more normal, creative, and acceptable. People are allowed to have different narratives and surround themselves with

different narratives in different parts of the world.

The narrative an attorney has in a [large law firm in New York City](#) is different than the narrative of an attorney in Omaha, Nebraska. The narrative of attorneys inside every law firm is going to be different in some way--but there is never room for negativity.

### See the following articles for more information:

[Top 10 Reasons Attorneys Should Look at Multiple Markets in Their Job Search](#)

[Why Relocating to a Different Market Is the Greatest \(But Little Known\) Way for a Law Firm Attorney to Get Ahead in the Legal Profession](#)

[Breaking Into a Smaller Market](#)

### Listening to the Right Narratives at Your Law Firm

I was talking with another recruiter from our firm about one of her candidates, whose LinkedIn profile said they were a "recovering attorney" who took some time off to write a book. The attorney was looking for a job. This is not a good narrative.

This attorney will not get a good job. This attorney will never be [happy practicing law](#). No one should hire them. In fact, if you have a negative narrative about practicing law or being an attorney, no one should hire you.

Something that always amazes me is when I examine the sorts of attorneys who [become corporate attorneys in large law firms](#). Attorneys from Yale, Stanford, and other amazing law schools who studied classics in college and got Master's degrees often go into [corporate law](#) and become extremely successful doing so. I practiced corporate law for about six months and found it to be nothing like litigation. Corporate law was very technical, like being a highly talented clerk, and nothing like being [a litigator](#)--which involved writing, constructing stories, and so forth. The same goes for the difference between litigation and [real estate](#), or litigation and ERISA law. They involve completely different skills and use of the mind.

How could someone so well-versed in writing, classics, and so forth do well as a corporate, real estate, or [ERISA attorney](#)? The reason they are able to succeed is because they find meaning in their work and construct positive narratives around it. Regardless of their interest in writing, they are able to find purpose in doing capital markets work or real estate transactions. They do not construct a narrative around their love and enjoyment of doing only one type of work--they construct a narrative around enjoying exactly what they are doing. They learn to love and appreciate where they are and what their role is. They find meaning in the work where others find drudgery. The ones who end up achieving the most long-term success then proceed to create narratives about how much they enjoy their colleagues, the challenge, and more.

In contrast, the least successful attorneys construct different sorts of narratives. These narratives revolve around how little they enjoy their work, how their law firm is a bad place to work, and how they need to be in a different environment. Their narratives are defined by something negative--a collective misery and need to escape--and not something positive that will advance their careers and make them more successful and happy where they are. They surround themselves with other disaffected attorneys with similar narratives who are all destined to never reach their full potential. Some people are able to find meaning and construct good narratives wherever they are, but many others are not.

When I hire people, I generally want to hire people who have been at their previous employer for a long time. Whenever I hire people who were at their previous employer for 10 or more years, they generally stay with a new company for 10 or more years as well--even if they are doing a different type of job. The people who last the longest with most employers (myself included) seem to construct positive narratives about their jobs and



colleagues. They learn to find positive meaning in their work and never construct narratives that would disempower them. They are able to be happy when others are not--and because of this, they generally end up succeeding.

Years ago when I was practicing at my second law firm, a girl who was my best friend in the law firm sat down with me and started telling me how terrible the firm was, that she needed to leave and how I should be working in a different firm. At the time, I had not considered working in another law firm. I was upset with her because I knew that if I listened to her narrative and adopted it, I would be unhappy there. I decided to find new friends in the firm because I knew if I stayed friends with her, I would be under constant pressure to adopt her narrative and stop believing my narrative that I was constructing about how great being an attorney was, how great my colleagues were, how wonderful my firm was, and how much potential I had there! I knew that my success in this environment would depend on me keeping a positive narrative and surrounding myself with other attorneys who did the same.

Unfortunately, I eventually allowed myself to be overcome by the negative narratives of other attorneys in the law firm and I left--becoming a recruiter like I am now. I was surrounded by so many negative attorneys and unable to protect my own personal narrative for so long that it became too much. Also, I had always owned businesses and been independent since I was young, and I had a different narrative for myself and my life that I had constructed long ago. These negative narratives ended up colliding with my desire to work in a law firm and continue there. Working in a law firm did not fit with my narrative--however, I still knew that if I wanted to stay working in a law firm, it was important for me to protect my mind against the negative narratives of others.

Different law schools produce attorneys with different narratives as well. Attorneys from [Yale Law School](#), for example, often look down upon working in law firms and believe they should do something different. Academia, government, or public service seem like better pursuits--but they often do not last there. They leave or do something else entirely. Attorneys from the University of Virginia--where I went to law school--are far less intellectual and more likely to be drawn to the salaries of large law firms than public service or academia. This is not true for everyone at these schools, of course, but there are patterns of thinking and narratives that various schools seem to imprint on people. The same goes for law firms, families, religions, countries, and just about any group we belong to. Narratives pursue and influence us wherever we go.

Many attorneys in large law firms have a narrative that says they are unhappy and [should go in-house](#). Because of this narrative, these attorneys spend years looking for in-house jobs, never [committing to their law firm jobs](#), and always believing that everything will be better when they finally land an in-house job. Not surprisingly, these in-house jobs rarely end up being what they expected and they remain unhappy--not all attorneys, of course, but most. They may not realize it, but this doomed narrative is often promoted by the very law firms who want their former attorneys to go work for corporations and send them business. It is important to always ask yourself if the narrative you are adopting actually serves your agenda--or if it benefits someone else.

## Conclusions

You need to realize that your narratives will determine your happiness and success practicing law. The narratives you develop throughout your career will determine your path.

Communism is a narrative. Capitalism is a narrative. Christianity is a narrative. Being a hippie is a narrative. Being a vegetarian is a narrative. Everyone has narratives. We gravitate toward people with various narratives in hopes that they will make us feel good about ourselves and support our own narratives.

If you are going to be an attorney and you are going to work in a law firm, you need to adopt narratives that serve you and make you successful. You need to work in a law firm where the other attorneys have positive

narratives. You need to surround yourself with attorneys who have positive narratives not just for themselves, but also for the firm.

The second you adopt a negative narrative about your career, or the people you work with, you will start to become unhappy. You will stop achieving. If you are able to develop a positive narrative--in any circumstance--then you have found the key to keeping yourself happy, fulfilled, and motivated in your legal career.