



Notes from the Breadline: Let My Inspiration Flow

Thursday, April 23, 2009 10:00 AM - By Kashmir Hill & Elie Mystal

Ed. note: Welcome to the latest installment of "Notes from the Breadline," a column by a laid-off lawyer in New York. Prior columns are collected [here](#). You can reach Roxana St. Thomas by email (at roxanastthomas@gmail.com), follow her on [Twitter](#), or find her on [Facebook](#).



In last week's installment of [Notes from the Breadline](#), I enumerated a few of the reasons why I thought that hanging out the proverbial shingle was not right for me. You may further recall that the [commentariat](#) came ou, in force, to point out the infirmities in my position. (I know I do.)

"Who knew that the question of whether to venture into solo practice would be such a divisive one?" I asked Lat, pulling the remnants of virtual rotten tomatoes from my hair. "You would think that I had insulted [Susan Boyle](#). What am I missing?"

As we talked about the (numerous) ideas proffered by readers, Lat stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, Roxana," he said, referring to the suggestion of several commenters, "in light of [recent events](#), you might want to think twice about [advertising on Craigslist](#)."

He paused for a moment to take a sip of coffee (which runs, hot and cold, from a spigot in his office). "But, while I agree that hanging out a shingle isn't for everyone, perhaps this whole idea deserves a second look. Maybe you need to talk to a professional."

"What are you trying to say?" I asked pointedly.

"Hehe," he chuckled. "What I meant is that maybe you should get another perspective."

Lat was right: I needed to gather more information before categorically ruling out anything, whether it was the possibility of striking out on my own or one of the countless other ideas I had entertained. But who could I talk to?

After asking around and conducting a bit of due diligence, I reached out to [Ari Kaplan](#), a writer and former practicing attorney who has become something of a professional development guru.

Like many of us, Ari was an associate at a Biglaw firm ([McDermott Will & Emery](#)), for much of his career. While he was busy toiling away, billing hours, and scrambling to keep his head above water through various cycles of boom and bust, he was also consistently churning out articles on an assortment of topics. Ari estimates that, while he was a practicing attorney, he wrote about 120 articles for publication.

These efforts eventually led him to write a book, [The Opportunity Maker: Strategies for Inspiring Your Legal Career](#), which was published last year. Ari now works full-time as a professional [writer](#) and [speaker](#).

Read about Ari's professional journey, and his insights for Roxana on hers, after the jump.

(As a preliminary matter, I make the following disclaimer: this is not a pitch for Ari. Ari can (and does) pitch himself far more persuasively than I ever could, and although I found him to be informative and generous (with his time and advice), I leave that task in his capable hands. I should also note that I started out by reading Ari's book, [The Opportunity Maker](#) – and you can, too. But since I am just an out-of-work lawyer, and not a book reviewer, I will resist any nostalgia for the days of IRAC briefing and refrain from summarizing it.)

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While juggling law and writing, Ari came to the proverbial crossroads. Fortunately, he did not have to decide whether to become the bond-servant of the devil in exchange for whiskey, women, and the everlasting gift of the Blues. He did, however, feel that he had to choose whether to keep practicing law (the safe choice), or to take the leap of faith required to embark on a career as a writer (the inspired but risky choice).

I'm reasonably certain that, if there had been such a negotiation, the devil (in the form of **Al Pacino**, **Meryl Streep**, or a **big red guy** with a penchant for Saddam Hussein) would have walked away empty-handed, leaving Ari with the benefit of the bargain. I had been warned that Ari was almost preternaturally positive, and – guess what? He is.

But, at the risk of stating the obvious, this may be the secret to his success (and the most basic takeaway, for all us). "I *promise* you," Ari told me at the outset, "if you and your colleagues can fight your nervousness about cold calling and reaching out to people you don't know and then strategize about how to actually do it, you'll be stunned, as soon as you try it, by how it works."

Despite his infectious enthusiasm, I found myself clinging to skepticism. The devil (pardon the expression) is in the details, and I wanted more of them. Without specifics, a game plan premised on facing fear and finding courage sounded not entirely unlike ... well, **The Secret**.

The ensuing conversation went something like this.

Roxana St. Thomas: In your book, you talk a lot about steps that law students and young associates can take, early on, to carve out a niche for themselves and fashion a career path. But what's your advice for lawyers who are a little further down the road, and are currently worrying about survival and trying to hang on to the job they still have? What if you're a mid-level attorney who has just been laid off? Let's talk about strategies for inspiring a legal career in the current economic environment.

Ari Kaplan: Sometimes, looking away is the best way to look at your situation. I understand what it's like for a lot of attorneys right now: you spend your life practicing law, and suddenly you're faced with a jarring set of circumstances, like a layoff, or even just the fear of being laid off. But you need to view it as a jarring *opportunity*. If you're one of those attorneys, this is the time to figure out whether you need to get back on the same track, or switch to a different track. Some day, you'll have to ask yourself whether you used your time wisely.

RST: What are some ways to do that?

AK: Well, first of all, you need to think about what interests you – whatever it happens to be. It doesn't have to be a legal topic; it just has to be something that's important to you. Learn more about it. Meet people who are involved in whatever it is. Talk to people and get ideas. Conferences are a good place to start. For example, I'm going to a conference for journalists and authors this weekend. If someone were interested in that field, a conference like this one would be a great place to start.

RST: Hmm ... go on. What's another example?

AK: You – and by "you" I mean anyone I would give this advice to – could think about teaching. Most of us are not going to get a job teaching at a law school, but there are a lot of other opportunities. For instance, I taught internet law at Baruch College, in a business program. Check out the Chronicle of Higher Education's [website](#). There are all kinds of teaching positions posted there.

RST: Okay. What else?

AK: Basically, you need to think about how you can leverage your position.

RST: What does that mean, in practical terms?

AK: It means that the only way you're going to find opportunity is to seek it out. Start by asking people what's missing. What need can you fill? For example, a lot of employers are looking for what you might call "virtual assistants": lawyers who can assist with a specific task, like brief writing. In this market, law students and attorneys need to find a way to identify those areas of need – in other words, to figure out how to ask potential employers what jobs they need done. Then you need to figure out what you actually know how to do.

RST: That sounds good, but I know a lot of lawyers who wouldn't know where to begin that process. I think that's especially true with respect to Big Law associates, who spend a lot of time doing what they're told, whether they do it well or not. How does an associate "break it down," and figure out what his or her skills are?

AK: Figuring out what you actually know how to do can be a problem for Big Law associates, but it's not as hard as it looks. For instance, think about whether you've reviewed contracts as part of your job. That's a skill that a potential employer might need. Think about whether you've drafted certain kinds of documents, like employment agreements. Start asking very particular questions about what employers need to get done.

RST: That raises another issue. How, exactly, do you go about reaching out to people, whether they're potential employers or just useful contacts? Who are you reaching out to? And if it was so easy.

wouldn't everyone have a job?

AK: Don't get me wrong: all of the things I'm suggesting require effort. But you have to be creative. Tap into your alumni network. Almost every school has a database that alumnae can opt into if they're willing to have lunch or meet with students or other graduates. Here's another idea: write for your alumni magazine. Pick a topic to write about, and then look for alumnae who are in positions related to that topic. It's not hard to find alumnae who are general counsel of a company, or who work at a government agency, or handle the kinds of matters in which you're interested in their private practice. Write to them and request an interview, or ask whether they'd be willing to talk to you about your subject.

RST: [pauses dubiously]

AK: Look, you have to be realistic. If you send out the kinds of requests I'm talking about, you'll get a response to *some* of them. But you'll get a response to nothing if you don't do it at all. It takes action to get reaction, and it's definitely a numbers game. You have to just be *out there*, talking to people in your "space." Remember: networking is about your passion; rainmaking is about your practice. And "rain" is what you can offer the people you come into contact with. Just keep in mind that alumni are the easiest, best, and first place to start. Once you make those contacts, find some way to demonstrate your genuine interest in the person and the subject. Your willingness to learn more about someone, or something, so that you can write an article or a profile is something of value.

RST: That sounds good. But what can you tell lawyers who have spent a good deal of time acquiring expertise in an area they're *not* passionate about? If you want to (or have to) sell yourself based on experience, is pursuing your passion an unaffordable luxury in this market? I mean, what if you've spent years doing insurance defense, but still find insurance defense totally uninteresting?

AK: You know, Roxana, I would first tell those people to think creatively. I meet so many people who tell me that what they really want to do is something completely different than what they're doing. It's not enough to be deeply interested in a particular area. Let's say, for instance, that your passion is for sports law. Do something related to sports law! Get to know people in the sports law community! Approach someone who is an expert in that field. People think it's impossible, but it's not. It's really not.

RST: Don't you think that it seems impossible because of the current market?

AK: Maybe, but that's why you need to figure out how to do something extra. The reality is that, in these times, you need to find better, more practical ways to get ahead. And you know something? People are much more willing to meet with you in this market ... as long as you're not exploiting them for the sole purpose of job searching.

Remember: opportunities come from strange places. People who go into a meeting with their resume printed on their tie, so to speak, make it clear that they're interested in one thing: scoring a job. On the other hand, if you meet someone with the genuine intention of getting to know them, hearing what they have to say, and building a relationship, you're likely to get a lot more out of the encounter. You would be amazed by the caliber of people who would be willing to sit down and talk to you, if you just ask ... the contacts you make with those people, and the relationships you build, will make your life richer.

RST: Where does passion fit in when you *are* desperate to score a job?

AK: You always have to make time to find your passion. Every single human being struggles with this balance. If you don't feel as though you're in the position to pursue your passion, at least pursue relationships with people in your area.

RST: Explain.

AK: Let's go back to the example of insurance defense. You may not be interested in insurance defense, but if you take the time to get to know the people you work and come into contact with, they will knock your socks off. The more you find out about people, the more likely you are to discover a connection. That connection will inspire you, and that little bit of inspiration will take you to the next step.

RST: What's your advice for the associates out there who are primarily worried about survival right now?

AK: Find ways to really demonstrate (a) a sincere interest in what you're working on, and (b) the ways in which you add value. For instance, if you're working on matters that involve oil and gas, write a memo for the partner that will educate him or her about that field. Set up a Google alert with keywords related to oil and gas, and use it to keep the partner updated on important news or issues. Share information with the partner so that she can share it with the client; that way, everyone is successful. Use websites, like www.helpareporter.com, that help journalists connect with sources. If you can provide the partner with an opportunity to act as an industry expert for a reporter, you are making your communication with that partner valuable. It's all about thinking more broadly.

RST: If you happen to get laid off, is it too late to reinvent yourself professionally? And how do you create value when you're out of a job?

AK: Make of list of 10 to 20 people you want to meet. For example, do you want to meet every in-house counsel in Atlanta? Make that your goal. You won't meet all of them, but once you start reaching out to them, connections will pop up. Then demonstrate what you have to offer THEM. Again, writing a profile or conducting an interview is a great place to start. Do an industry research project for your alumni magazine; reach out to 25 important litigators and ask them to be sources. Find an accomplished alum and write a profile about him or her. Figure out what kind of information might be valuable to people in your [LinkedIn](#) group.

RST: How can a lawyer distinguish himself from the rest of the laid-off horde?

AK: You have to find ways to enhance your visibility, and make yourself stand out. Whether you try one of the approaches I mentioned [above] or something you come up with on your own, remember that your value comes from what you can do for other people, not what they can do for you. And that starts with finding out what they're most likely to be interested in. No matter what you do, be genuine. That's essential to making a connection.

RST: Do you find that lawyers are resistant to the idea of reaching out to make these connections?

AK: Absolutely. They don't think it's realistic. They don't think anyone will talk to them. They go into it thinking "they'll hate me." But great networkers and rainmakers *find* ways to connect. And the best way to do that is to figure out how to provide the thing of value that I keep talking about, and to demonstrate real enthusiasm when you provide it. You can profile someone for a website, or record an interview with someone interesting and post it on [Twitter](#). Just remember to be specific when you approach that person: tell them that you think their perspective would be incredibly valuable for your project for an identifiable reason.

RST: Speaking of which ... this has been incredibly valuable for me, and, hopefully, for our readers. Can you give us some parting words of wisdom?

AK: Sure. First, overcome your fear of rejection. I suggest that you – meaning lawyers in general – don't overanalyze things; just get out there and approach people. It's so much easier nowadays, with tools like LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook, to find information about people that will help you to connect with them. You just need to take the leap of faith and do it.

Second, be creative when you come up with a reason why someone should talk to you. As lawyers, we're not used to thinking about the unique qualities we bring to the table, because we haven't been faced with having to create things on our own. You have to know what you can do, and then know how to *sell* what you do.

Finally, approach the process of connecting with people with real sincerity. You'll find that it's actually a lot of fun, and that, when you figure out what you genuinely want to learn about someone else, the connection will be that much richer. And the relationships that you maintain because of those connections are the ones which will bear fruit. Trust me, Roxana: finding ways to meet – and stay in touch with – people you like and truly find interesting can be an incredibly inspiring reward in an otherwise uninspiring situation.

RST: Thanks, Ari. I feel inspired already.

Roxana St. Thomas is a laid-off lawyer living in New York. You can reach her by email (at roxanasthomas@gmail.com), follow her on [Twitter](#), or find her on [Facebook](#).

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