

# Advice for the Restless Lawyer

## Discovering Your Possibilities

**You are bright and strong and capable of anything. You deserve fulfilling work and a life that makes you tingle. Insights from a lawyer and best-selling writer turned career coach.**

BY TAMA J. KIEVES

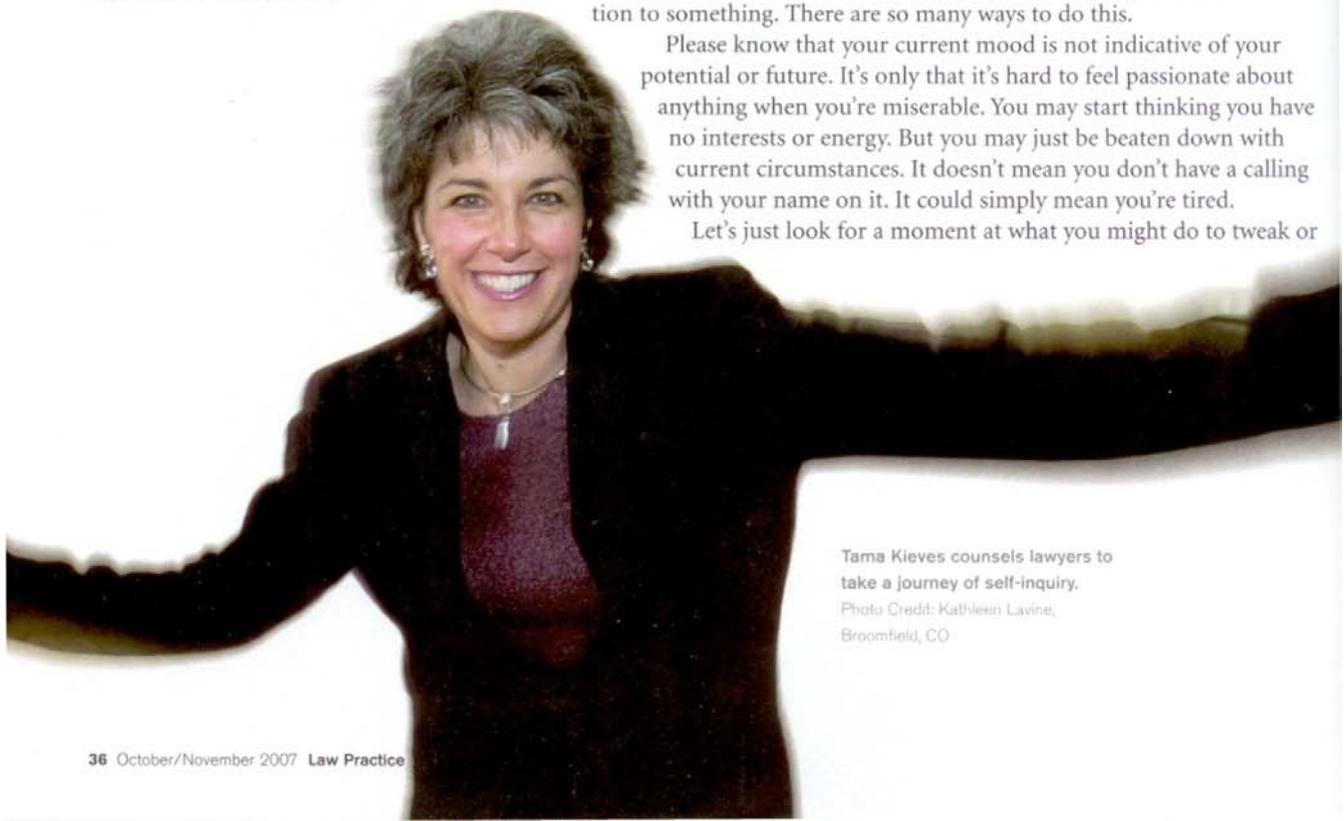
It's natural—and healthy—for people to pause in their middle years, take stock of their careers, and ask “Is this what I want to be doing for the remainder of my work life?” For some lawyers, this taking stock results in a resounding affirmation that they love their profession and their practice settings. Others come to realize they're not really happy with their current jobs but don't know what they would rather do instead. Let's say the latter describes you—then here's direction for exploring your next steps.

First, I advise you to consider this question, the same one that came to me when I was in your position some years ago: If you are this successful doing work you *don't* love, what could you do with work you *do* love?

You deserve to feel alive and inspired and to give your full contribution to something. There are so many ways to do this.

Please know that your current mood is not indicative of your potential or future. It's only that it's hard to feel passionate about anything when you're miserable. You may start thinking you have no interests or energy. But you may just be beaten down with current circumstances. It doesn't mean you don't have a calling with your name on it. It could simply mean you're tired.

Let's just look for a moment at what you might do to tweak or



Tama Kieves counsels lawyers to take a journey of self-inquiry.

Photo Credit: Kathleen Lavina, Broomfield, CO

refine your current situation. And then let's talk about how to find out what else you can do instead.

### CAN YOU LOVE YOUR CURRENT JOB?

#### Think About Rearranging or Renovating

Look around you and assess your job and work environment. Are there parts of your job you really dislike? What if those parts were gone? What do you love about your job? What elements still fuel you? If you could design the perfect situation within your firm or company, what would it be? Who might you need to talk to recraft things?

Or is it a balance issue? Sometimes it's not the job that's killing us; it's the way we do the job. For example, if you devoted more time to your family, or to going away to your cabin, or to doing tai chi on the weekends, would this be the nourishment you're missing?

Maybe you simply need a shift in thinking, to reprioritize. I have a client who works for a small prestigious law firm and isn't prepared to leave her position. She longs to write fiction, though. Instead of leaving her job, she just decided not to let it monopolize her. She decided to put her writing first in line. She gets up before dawn and writes before she steps into her lawyer self. "I give it my best mental energy, before I'm sucked into work," she says. "And when the boss upsets me, I use that material in the novel. It's great therapy." I've watched her attitude, her life and even her career blossom as a result.

But sometimes it isn't a balance issue or a small adjustment that's required. Sometimes we're talking career overhaul. There are many ways to stimulate your thoughts about careers. You can read the want ads, talk to other lawyers or sift through career change books. But why not use your career discontent as a creative opportunity to go even deeper with your search? The famous psychologist Abraham Maslow said, "All that we can be, we must be." There is this imperative within us. Consider this time in your life as your launching pad.

**"Want to find out what really thrills you? Then ramp up your commitment to fun. Yes, fun. It's the most productive thing you can do on your career journey."**

### HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO DO?

#### Take Time Out

As a career coach, I hear this often: "I have lots of ideas, but I'm not sure what to do." Here's the deal. Your mind may be swarming with ideas. But you only have a few crystal-clear choices when you listen to your heart or your gut. When you connect with your feelings or instincts, everything falls away except the truth. But you won't know what you want when you're overwhelmed or numb.

The first step in any career search is getting time and space away from your current career. Or as I like to phrase it, "It takes an intermission to give birth to a mission." Many lawyers are overworked and under the gun all the time, as I know well from my former career as a trial lawyer. I wanted to chart an alternative, be inspired by some other life choice, but I lived on adrenaline, not inspiration. I couldn't work my crazy hours and dive for pearls of wisdom at the same time. I needed time away from work. And so will you.

You might need to take a vacation, work fewer hours, reclaim your weekends or even leave your job before you know what you want to do next. You will need free, unscheduled time, or musing time, time that helps you connect back to your essential self. You might try taking a walk, meditating, journaling, listening to music, or talking to a good friend or a great therapist or coach. Dare to begin the journey of self-inquiry, of

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getting to know what you feel, think and desire. There is nothing more important in your lifetime. For many of us, this self-inquiry feels frustrating—we just want an answer! But first we must do the research. We have to research ourselves to find out who we are today and what we want.

#### **Give Yourself Permission to Imagine It All**

Sometimes we don't know what we want because we don't *allow* ourselves to know. We deny the desires that threaten to rock (or even sink) our boats. I was terrified to admit to myself that I wanted to be a writer. It sounded like a one-way ticket to poverty. I lied to myself and to my therapist weekly, saying, “I don't know what I want.” Here's the secret to immediate clarity. Give yourself permission to want anything. It's just information. You don't have to reject it or leap on it right away.

Want to find out what really thrills you? Then ramp up your commitment to fun. Yes, fun. It's the most

productive thing you can do on your career journey. Explore the projects, passions, causes and dreams you may have put aside. Ignore that knee-jerk temptation to “get realistic.” It doesn't belong in the brainstorming pull-all-the-possibilities-out-of-the-hat stage.

Most lawyers don't know what they love because they never ask themselves the question “What do I love?” They ask themselves “What do I love that will make money?” Or “What do I love that I have credentials for?” Or “What do I love that I'm not too old for?” But you cannot find your big answers with limiting questions.

You are looking for where you have heat, natural drive and inexplicable joy or interest. For the moment, turn off that legal brain that identifies liabilities and evaluates risks. Yes, it's easy to think about something you'd like to do and immediately analyze all that can go wrong with it. Instead, though, allow yourself to imagine the other side of the coin. Imagine that you have more talents, power and resources than you know. Imagine

that you could succeed at anything you dared to try. Personally, I don't think these are wild imaginings but obvious truths.

Once you have ideas about things you might like to do, experiment with them. Read about your interest, take a class or volunteer to learn more. Give yourself permission to try different things and to take your time. You may have different career expressions within the law or outside the law or both. Don't rein yourself in or define yourself too soon. It may be uncomfortable to not have a tidy label. But it's even more uncomfortable to work day in and day out in a career that doesn't fit you.

#### **Taste the Future and Respect Your Gifts**

Never forget that the pain of your discontent is the voice of your unexpressed possibility. It's a good thing. It will make you step into the life you deserve. Remember, too, members of the legal profession have much potential. We threw our graduation caps into the sky and they landed with a secret obligation. We are called to go higher in our lives, use our rich gifts, think for ourselves, taste every opportunity, redefine this world, and create new pathways, paradigms and possibilities for others. So go beyond your fears and doubts and choose to honor your brilliance. May you give yourself everything you need—and shower our world with your gifts. **LP**

Tama J. Kieves ([www.awakeningartistry.com](http://www.awakeningartistry.com)) left her practice with a large corporate law firm to write and embolden others to live and breathe their most meaningful self-expression. She is a speaker, career coach and best-selling author of *This Time I Dance! Creating the Work You Love: How One Harvard Lawyer Left It All to Have It All* (Tarcher/Penguin). She is also on the faculty of Omega Institute.