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Passion & mastery in balance: toward good work in the professions

Whether or not people belong to a true 'profession' as sociologists define the term, they usually consider profes-

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sionalism to be a quality worth striving for. To call someone a pro implies that the person knows what to do and does it well. Professionals don't act naively, make stupid mistakes, or get easily flustered. Professionals have staying power and can be counted on: they 'go on with the show' no matter how they're feeling. It is this attitude that journalist Alistair Cooke had in mind when he said, "A professional is a person who can do his best at a time when he doesn't particularly feel like it."

Professionalism in any field – medicine, law, sports, butchery, baking, or candlestick making – implies dependable work reflecting a solid mastery of occupational knowledge, standards, and methods. Mastery of this sort matters greatly to clients. Who would go into surgery with a doctor who had not acquired professional skill? Or hire a lawyer with an 'unprofessional' reputation? Or, for that matter, buy from a butcher who didn't know a pork chop from a short rib?

Yet the prestige of professionalism, especially during recent times, has been tarnished by the indifferent, self-serving, and sometimes unethical work of some professionals. No doubt the high-pressure demands of today's professional fields have a lot to do with this. In a world of HMOs, mandated billed-hour

quotas, and other bottom-line assessment standards, matters of great importance to the lives of clients – a shady spot on a brain scan, an audit notice from the IRS, a child who can't learn in school – may become little more than chores in a professional's daily routine. With a frame of mind that used to be summed up (in a pre-inflation era) as 'another day, another dollar,' professionals may find it hard to maintain a sense of pride in their expertise, let alone a mission-driven enthusiasm for their daily work.

The obverse of professional status is amateurism, connoting passion and enthusiastic engagement.¹ The freely given passion of the amateur is evident in avocations such as sports, where participants labor long and hard to acquire expertise for the game itself, and where blatant commercial incentives are seen as contaminating the original spirit of the game. The move from amateur to professional status suggests a loss of innocence and authenticity, heightening the contrast between the two. One field in which the contrast is particularly sharp is the occupation long known as the world's oldest profession – and there are many more conventional endeavors that also prize the passionate naiveté of the amateur while distrusting the chilly indifference of the professional. Some endeavors have such a strong aversion to professionalism that they have not been able to agree upon the shared standards, credentialing requirements, or best practices to recommend to novices wishing to enter the field.²

1 By 'passion,' we mean heartfelt engagement, possibly but not necessarily of a joyful kind. Indeed, our use of the term encompasses both pleasant and unpleasant sorts of enthusiasms.

2 Philanthropy and the clergy are two such fields that we have examined in our studies.

Can the purposeful passion of the amateur be combined with the expertise and reliability of the professional? An integration of passion and professionalism is notoriously difficult to sustain in the course of a working life. For one thing, professional success often sows the seeds of passion's destruction through many little compromises that help keep the job manageable: a doctor learns how to limit time with patients to deal with an increasing workload; a lawyer learns how to play the court system like a game rather than as a mission of justice and rights; a teacher discovers that getting by with lower expectations is just fine with most students.

In the other direction, passion can sow the seeds of professional destruction: an overzealous prosecutor plants evidence on a suspect; a scientist, fervently wishing to convince people to stop smoking, exaggerates data on the risks of second-hand smoke. Too much caring can cloud professional judgment. There are good reasons why surgeons refuse to operate on loved ones.

All professionals must learn a formidable array of skills, habits, and understandings to master their fields. But beyond this, to accomplish good work consistently, they must acquire a special orientation, a commitment to use their mastery to fulfill a mission that goes beyond the self. It is the pursuit of a mission that inspires passion. This does not mean that pursuing a mission is always pleasurable: we do not agree with the pop psychology view that equates meaningful work with fun. Indeed, the etymological root of 'passion' is *passio* – or 'to suffer.' We are aware that pursuing a noble mission is often painful. Yet it is satisfying in a way that routinized, fill-the-hours work is not. Good work is always mindful of its mission; and passion, whether painful or pleasurable,

both energizes the mission and provides an enduring emotional reward that goes beyond pleasure or pain.

But passion must be kept in check when it threatens to do inadvertent harm; it must, in fact, be regulated by the knowledge that mastery brings. Balancing passion and mastery requires that each be fully developed and that the two operate simultaneously. British psychiatrist Anthony Storr referred to this integration when he commented, “The professional must learn to be moved and touched emotionally, yet at the same time stand back objectively. I’ve seen a lot of damage done by tea and sympathy.”

Keeping a sense of mission alive while not letting it get out of hand is possible only for those who really believe in the mission and have enough self-perspective to remain wary of dangers such as arrogance, megalomania, misguided beliefs, and a host of other distorted or mistaken judgments that anyone can have from time to time. Fulfilling a profession’s mission at a high level of excellence requires not only analytic distance and freedom from personal bias, but also passionate engagement, personal commitment, and human concern. And these qualities must not merely coexist; they must be kept in some kind of integrated balance.

Achieving this kind of balance is a challenge under the best of circumstances; in times of stress, it becomes a test of character. If nothing else, the beginning of our new millennium has been a time of great stress. In addition to the cataclysmic events surrounding September 11 and the interminable war on terrorism they spawned, there has been a hardening of expectations and a coarsening of social relationships due to economic pressures of a sort that profes-

sionals of previous generations rarely experienced. In such a climate, the public mission of work can be obscured by excessive attention to the short-term signals of the market. In research interviews with professionals, we have observed widespread anguish about this consequence, even among those who generally applaud the role of market forces. When speaking about publishing, for example, Irving Kristol said that when he was starting out, the producers of newspapers and books “were satisfied with a modest return . . . so long as they got enough to pay their salary and cover all their expenses, with a little extra for development. So it was 9 or 10 percent on your investment, not so bad.” Now media companies routinely expect profit margins exceeding 20 percent, and they press eagerly to get to 30 percent if they can. “And that,” said Kristol, “has been an awful development.”

For the professional who enters a field with a different goal in mind – say, a journalist intent on covering civic affairs in-depth rather than producing sensationalistic stories, or a doctor intent on caring for patients rather than maximizing an HMO’s profits – this increased emphasis on market priorities can throw the sense of mission into doubt. The nagging question becomes, “Does the purpose of my work still bear any resemblance to what I wanted to accomplish when I first chose my career?” If the answer is no, sustaining the original passion for the work may quickly become a lost cause. The problem can be even more severe for younger workers, whose public mission may be grounded in ideals they have only read about or seen on television.

Market forces always will be part of the landscape of work, and more often than not they exert a beneficial influence, providing accountability and infor-

Passion & mastery in balance: toward good work in the professions

mation about the real value of the services that are being offered. But market operations vary enormously across time and place, and, like any social or economic force, can do harm when they gain excessive influence. Professionals in many fields today – particularly in medicine, law, and education – perceive that the demands of the market have escalated. There is no question that those who have lived and worked through this change feel pressures for which they are not prepared.

Professionals have always had to balance multiple goals, but in times of severe market pressure, the stakes are especially high. If people believe their economic survival is threatened, they may conclude that success in their profession means ignoring the public mission and focusing on business transactions alone. If they believe it has become impossible to accomplish the public mission within the profession's contemporary framework, they may give up on the enterprise entirely. Choices of either kind harm the public interest, the profession, and the worker.

How can a person master the demands of the field, even as it becomes increasingly market oriented, while retaining a love for the work and a passion for the mission to which the work is dedicated? We take this as a central problem for professionals in our time.

The pressures of many of today's workplaces create conditions under which it is difficult for individuals to pursue non-economic professional values. And since these conditions show no sign of improving – indeed, they may well continue to get worse – we need to strengthen individuals' ability to do good work under less than hospitable conditions. Education is the only realistic way of accomplishing this.

To be both masterful and mission-driven, students need to learn how to be disinterested without being detached. Finding the right equilibrium between analytic distance and human connection is a tension that appears in some form in all professions. Professional schools also must find ways to balance the intellectual rigors of the domain with its fundamental purposes, which serve for many students as the inspiration for entering the profession. This is another essential tension that is not easily resolved: professional education can err on either side of the balance between intellectual rigor and connection with the underlying social purpose of the profession. It takes years of learning for students to develop and integrate these capabilities successfully, and the most effective tools for this learning are not obvious or well elaborated in professional education at this time – nor is most undergraduate education attuned to this key task.

In what follows, we examine this task with reference to two disparate fields: law and journalism. Law is a formal profession in that it requires certification through degrees and licenses; journalism is an informal one in that it has no credentialing requirements. Three-fourths of working journalists have never attended journalism school, but instead learned on the job by apprenticing to experienced reporters and editors. These two cases illustrate the need for educational shifts within both professional schools and in-service settings.

Many commentators from within the legal profession have pointed in recent years to widespread declines in public esteem and to dramatic increases in attorneys' dissatisfaction with their work. According to many observers, the 'crisis of professionalism' can be seen in a decline of civility and an increase in adver-

sarialism; a decline in the role of the counselor and in lawyers' competence, including ethical competence; a loss of calling or sense of purpose among lawyers; and a new sense of the law as a business, subject to greater competitive economic pressures and answerable only to the bottom line.

Survey data show that most lawyers would choose another career if they had the decision to make again, and three-quarters would not want their children to become lawyers. In addition, attorneys suffer from depression, alcoholism, and drug addiction at significantly higher rates than the general public. Of course there are many reasons for lawyers' dissatisfaction with their work, but lack of a sense of meaning is one central cause. Only one-fifth of attorneys report that their careers have borne out their hope of contributing to the social good.³

Although law schools are surely not the primary cause of this malaise, at this point they seem to contribute more to the problem than to its solution. We have said that professional education can err on either side of the balance between an intellectually rigorous initiation into the discipline and a connection with the fundamental purposes of the domain – in this case, the pursuit of justice. There is no doubt about which side of this balance takes precedence in law schools. Law schools excel in producing intellectual mastery – teaching the special brand of analytic thinking, close reading, and careful use of language that is known as 'thinking like a lawyer.' During the famously intense first year of the American law school, students from widely different personal and academic backgrounds, with different knowledge,

assumptions, and habits of mind, are taught to master this powerful mode of legal analysis. By the end of the year, the ability to think like a lawyer is deeply engrained, forming a common base for more advanced learning and a central element in the practice of law.

Accomplishing this transformation entails a concentrated focus on the details of particular legal cases disconnected from consideration of the larger purposes of the law. First-year students are repeatedly told to set justice aside, not to let their moral concerns or compassion for the people in the cases they discuss cloud their analyses. This practice does seem to be effective in helping free students from misconceptions about how the law works. But moral concerns are seldom reintroduced in the second and third years of law school, even though by then students have mastered the analytic skills for whose sake these concerns were stripped away. Over and over, students express dismay and confusion about the implications of this dispassionate perspective: "It seems like legal thinking can justify anything." "When I took criminal law, I started to think of it in technical terms and stopped looking at the human side." "Law schools create people who are smart without a purpose."

For many students, the single-minded pursuit of intellectual mastery effectively shuts out mission-driven passion. In law schools' top students, a different kind of passion emerges – the sheer delight of intellectual virtuosity as an end in itself. Since these virtuosos tend to become the next generation of law school faculty, the system reproduces itself; it has remained largely unchanged for more than a hundred years.

It is true that, in order to comply with accreditation guidelines, law schools require all students to take a course in

³ Deborah L. Rhode, *In the Interests of Justice: Reforming the Legal Profession* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 8.

legal ethics. Most often this course is structured around legal cases that concern alleged violations of the American Bar Association's ethical code. Students apply their analytic skills to these cases, approaching them the same way they deal with challenging legal cases in torts or contracts. This approach, known as the law of lawyering, is valuable in teaching an area of law that should be of immediate concern to every practicing attorney.

Unfortunately, however, legal ethics courses taught this way inadvertently send some ethically counterproductive messages. When these courses focus exclusively on the law of lawyering, they can convey a sense that attorneys' behavior is bounded only by sanctions such as the threat of malpractice charges, and can give the impression that most practicing lawyers refrain from unethical behavior only when it is in their immediate self-interest to do so. These courses, in essence, teach students what they can and can't get away with. No wonder Stanford Law School professor Deborah Rhode calls these courses "legal ethics without the ethics."⁴

Beyond the law of lawyering, many law school faculty doubt both the feasibility and the legitimacy of educating for ethical development and passion grounded in the mission of law. Based on research in developmental psychology, we know they are wrong about the feasibility of educating for ethical maturity, and we believe they are wrong about its legitimacy. Some faculty at virtually every law school – though admittedly a minority – agree and have begun to develop creative ways to teach with ethics and passion in mind.

Some faculty have adopted the 'pervasive method' of teaching ethics, in which ethical issues specific to particular fields

4 Ibid., 200.

of law are incorporated into substantive courses. Some law schools provide special experiences in the first year that introduce students to the broader context and significance of the law. To address the limitations of legal ethics courses as they are traditionally taught, many law schools offer courses in ethics that go beyond the law of lawyering to a deeper consideration of the complexities of lawyers' roles, the context of meaning for legal work, and the kinds of social capacities lawyers need to be fully competent, including the ability to listen carefully, to work collaboratively, and to question stereotypes and assumptions. In addition to these curricular programs, all law schools offer extracurricular experiences that support a deeper understanding of the contributions law can make to the social good.

A program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill illustrates the kinds of experiences some law schools are developing to help students find an inspiring vision of what it means to be a lawyer. In the UNC Law School Oral History Project, students interview practicing lawyers and judges who represent the highest ideals of the profession – "lawyers and judges who [are] living lives dedicated to a higher purpose, who love what they [are] doing, and who [find] intellectual richness and creativity in lawyers' work." These are lawyers and judges who are "proud of being members of the profession, who [feel] that being a lawyer involves a deep moral commitment, that it is a position not only of prestige but of honor."⁵ Through ongoing relationships with the interviewees, students who participate in the Oral History Project have the opportunity to internalize heroic images of profes-

5 Walter Bennett, *The Lawyer's Myth: Reviving Ideals in the Legal Profession* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6.

sionalism, and to draw on these when confronting difficult moral problems.

In his acclaimed book *The Lost Lawyer*, Anthony Kronman argues that the American legal profession “stands in danger of losing its soul.”⁶ If law schools are to help counter this trend, they will need to adopt programs like the Oral History Project on a larger scale. But unfortunately, this kind of creative education for ethical-social learning is the exception rather than the rule on most campuses. And given the central place of the legal profession in American society, this relative lack of attention to ethical-social learning does a disservice not only to a great but troubled profession, but also to the nation and the world.

What can be done to turn the many available elements into a formative experience that reaches all who enter the practice of law? In our view, what is needed above all is the conviction that shaping professional responsibility and identity is the duty of legal education, along with the will to make this agenda a high priority. If this foundation were in place, creating a more intentional, integrated, and powerful preparation for good work would be within the grasp of law schools within the next five to ten years.

However great a commitment law schools make to this agenda, they cannot entirely insulate students against the harsh realities of inhumane structures and contexts in legal practice. But despite their own sometimes inhumane structures and contexts, law schools do not seem terribly far from being the kinds of institutions that could create committed, visionary individuals that can change those realities.

6 Anthony T. Kronman, *The Lost Lawyer: Failing Ideals of the Legal Profession* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), 1.

Passion guided by ethics and balanced by impartiality is as important, and probably as elusive, for journalists as it is for lawyers. Journalists frequently use the same words as lawyers to describe their loss of the ideals that drew them to the field in the first place. And journalists who do maintain their passion face the same risks as lawyers who become overzealous.

In our journalism research some years ago, we interviewed a rising young star who wrote about life in African American communities with a sensitivity and understanding that captivated readers. The reporter’s fearless, passionate column won numerous awards and attracted a new urban readership to the paper. There was just one problem with his writing – some of it was fiction. The reporter believed that creative writing could enhance factual reporting in conveying the essence of the narrative. In this conviction, he ignored one of the most basic tenets of his field: truthful, accurate reporting is an absolute standard. We might guess that the reporter had an amateur’s passion but not a professional’s grasp of the standards and methods necessary for doing good work in the domain. We also might guess that the problem lay more with the training (or, more precisely, the lack of training) that the reporter received as he rose through the ranks than with his own skills and passionate concerns, which were formidable.

In contrast, some seasoned veterans with an expert grasp of journalism’s best practices get so frustrated with poor working conditions, low pay, or escalating demands for ‘leads that bleed’ that they become cynical, apathetic, and burnt-out. Most academic programs for journalists do not provide instruction on how to sustain idealism or make it more sophisticated, robust, and usable

Passion & mastery in balance: toward good work in the professions

amidst the moral ambiguities and practical complexities of real life. In any case, as we noted at the outset, the majority of practicing journalists never go near journalism schools, except perhaps to give occasional lectures or to teach once they have retired.

In-practice education may offer the best hope of rekindling the flame that brought working journalists to the profession, while also reinforcing the basic tenets of the domain. In-practice education is important for all professions, and especially for those that do not require specialized degrees. One program that attempts to foster both passion and mastery has been developed in collaboration with the Washington-based Committee of Concerned Journalists (CCJ).⁷ The program is an interactive workshop centered on three half-day ‘modules’ chosen from among twelve options by the newsroom’s editor. The workshop – whose goals are to reawaken the commitment to the mission of journalism and to help journalists overcome the barriers that prevent a sense of mission from infusing their work – has worked with print, broadcast, and Internet newsrooms. To address the barriers in ways that are consistent with the deepest values of the mission, the workshop also pays close attention to the ethical principles underpinning high-quality journalism. The participants share strategies for bringing together the vigor and passion of the amateur with the methodological knowledge, technical know-how, and sober commitment of the expert.

Given the centrality of journalism’s public mission to this educational effort, it is important to begin with an articula-

tion of that mission. To this end, the CCJ conducted twenty-one nationwide public forums over the course of a year. After this extended examination of the character of journalism at the end of the twentieth century, a consensus emerged that “The central purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the accurate and reliable information they need to function in a free society.”⁸ Journalists widely acknowledge this mission, but it is often obscured by the press of deadlines, limited resources, and competing objectives.

To help reconnect journalists with this mission, workshop participants are asked to reflect on their initial decision to pursue the profession: Why did they choose this work? What interested them about it? What did they hope to accomplish? Responses are invariably enthusiastic and idealistic, reflecting respect for the mission articulated through the CCJ public forums. Participants then talk about how successful they feel they have been in accomplishing their original goals. Responses here tend to be more muted, focusing on barriers to working in ways that unambiguously serve the mission.

The remainder of the workshop addresses issues that are key to responsible journalism, such as achieving a deep understanding of exactly what unbiased reporting is and how it can be accomplished. Discussions of what journalists call independence, for example, focus on the relationships journalists establish with the people they cover. Fulfilling the mission of journalism requires just the right balance between impartiality and involvement. In the political domain, the curriculum presents cases such as Jim Lehrer of PBS, who claims he hasn’t

7 William Damon and Kendall Bronk participated in this collaboration. The CCJ is a “consortium of reporters, editors, producers, owners, and academics worried about the future of the [journalism] profession.”

8 The CCJ offers this summary of the responses it gathered.

voted in an election since 1964, and Leonard Downie, executive editor of *The Washington Post*, who goes even further, not allowing himself to decide which candidate he favors. Both believe these practices keep them from becoming too emotionally engaged in the issues they cover, protecting them from bias. In contrast, the workshop considers journalists who cover rallies or demonstrations they attend. These contrasting practices provide the stimulus for lively discussions about political journalists' proper relationships with the objects of their reporting.

Another activity that helps participants think through the delicate issue of balancing personal connection and professional detachment asks staffers to share their personal biographies and discuss the ways their backgrounds might have influenced past coverage. Personal experience relevant to the content of a story can be helpful. As one participant remarked, "I think my background as a first-generation American born to immigrants from the West Indies has benefited me when interviewing newcomers to this country. As a reporter for one paper, I wrote several stories about refugees from Kosovo and a Kurdish family that fled Iraq. My own experiences have given me a certain respect for and sensitivity toward other cultures and prevented me from lapsing into stereotypes." However, personal connections with the issues can also threaten responsible coverage, as indicated by another workshop participant: "After a miscarriage and several years of fertility treatments, I was sensitized to stories involving children. As a page 1 editor, I could not bring myself to print a story in the paper about a heinous crime involving the abuse and murder of an infant." Group activities such as this encourage participants to apply lessons to their daily work.

We have talked about two professions, but it is clear that they are not alone in facing challenges to the integration of passion and professionalism. Concerned organizations and individuals from within many professions have described the current moment as a turning point. As William Sullivan points out, professions are at risk of becoming technical services for hire, unmoored from the ethical features that help to make them professions.

New forms of regulation are being devised as one strategy for preventing the harm this can do – but ultimately professions are made up of individuals. If the professions are going to become more hospitable to good work, this will come about through the efforts of inspired and creative individuals. Education both before and after entry into the field can increase the likelihood that such individuals will emerge.

Passion & mastery in balance: toward good work in the professions