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Starting Out



I am a sole practitioner attorney who has been building a wills, trusts, and probate practice in Bellingham, Washington since June 2008. Although I certainly have a long way to go, I want to share some thoughts I hope will be inspirational about over-coming fear and doubt.

Trying to traverse unfamiliar territory is stressful and focusing on fear is suffocating. We have all overcome challenges in the past. And looking back, those struggles likely have been critical points in the process of define goals and hardening one's focus.

After law school I hiked the Continental Divide Trail from Canada to Mexico...alone...using homemade gear. Along the way people I encountered regularly expressed shock that I had not yet been killed by a grizzly, stranded by a broken leg or disappointed by inadequate gear.

Since I have started my practice colleagues have eyed me with equally severe suspicion of a doom and gloom¹.

Admittedly there is plenty of doom and gloom to provide crippling distraction...especially for attorneys. By focusing on one's abilities and the task at hand, however, the positive work one can do easily takes up a person's full attention.

Despite all the complaints from new law graduates, much of what any attorney has to offer revolves around the fundamental skills learned in school. Look up the statute, find cases that rule on the statute and apply your client's facts.

I would guess that on the whole Judges are refreshed by reading an "inexperienced" attorney's brief. In law school I worked as an extern for a Superior Court Judge and was able to read hundreds of pages of briefs and motions. I read excessively detailed briefs offered by big Seattle law firms. I also read briefs by attorneys who seemed to have a little process for stating a rule, explaining the rule, or analyzing and applying facts to a rule. My point is that a young attorney's fundamental legal skills are as sharp and useful as the most seasoned attorney's.

So in continuing with this pep talk, I think people will rarely feel in over their head on any project...so long as they have the time, space, and ambition to properly figure the matter out. For now, I am thankful there are many tasks at hand and I have many abilities by which to tackle them.

I considered, but decided against, waiting until I became more experienced to publish this article.

¹ There is likely historic support for being worried. Certainly many young sole practitioner attorneys do struggle. Additionally, attorneys in Whatcom County usually offer to make themselves available when I ask to hear their thoughts. I feel very lucky to practice in Whatcom County where I have found a thoroughly supportive community of attorneys practicing in estate planning and other areas.