

PUBLICATION

What Tree Frogs and Whippoorwills Taught Me

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A moment of vulnerability: I really love my job. Working at Baker Donelson is the dynamic, challenging, and rewarding job that I knew it would be, and it is no wonder that we consistently rate Baker so high for associate satisfaction. However, when I started as a brand-new associate in September 2021, I was struggling. After leaving a teaching career, tackling law school, getting through the pandemic, studying for a bar exam, completing a clerkship, and then losing a loved one a month before my Baker start date, I was not the challenge-motivated person that my résumé presented.

The problem was that I had **promised** myself over and over that next year or after the next hurdle, I would exercise, eat better, sleep more, and spend more time with my family. It was an old promise that I kept breaking as the deadlines piled up.

After a few months as a distracted, sedentary new associate with a mind full of bumblebees, I did like all great researchers and started Googling.

After wading through the life coach ads and Peloton commercials, I stumbled upon the [Mindfulness in Law Society \(MILS\)](#). I discovered that in addition to twice-weekly Zoom meditations, MILS was hosting a three-day mindfulness and yoga retreat for lawyers at [Gray Bear Lodge](#) in middle Tennessee (and yes, they were offering Tennessee-approved CLE credit). Turning again to Google, I found that Gray Bear advertised itself as being "about foggy mornings, beautiful sunrises, quiet walks, working meditations, whippoorwills, tree frogs, fresh air, starry nights, silence, and stillness ... A healing space to learn, grow, restore, and renew."

Tree frogs aside, it was as if the universe had conspired, so, in June of 2022, I made the three-hour drive from Memphis to Gray Bear. To set the Gray Bear scene, there is no cellphone service, no Wi-Fi, no computers, TVs, radios, or even clocks. Instead, there is a great big porch that looks out into a beautiful forest. The porch is filled with comfy couches, rocking chairs, a hammock, and windchimes. There is a rustic hot tub and a wood-fired sauna, and guests know when it is time for meals (all prepared with fresh, wholesome ingredients) by the ringing of a bell. At night, you can see every star in the sky.

Despite being in this pocket of heaven on Earth, I struggled at first to appreciate the magnificent gift of silence and stillness that Gray Bear offered. I was frazzled and more than a little worried about being off the grid for that long. Truthfully, I even found myself at one point walking around in the Gray Bear Garden trying to find a single bar of service so I could check my messages and email.

However, I soon gave in to the quiet and stillness around me – what I truly needed to start my healing and planning. The retreat was led by Cindy Pensoneau, Judge Steve Hornsby, and Stephanie Lewis, who are all attorneys and personal coaches. Thus, they were able to prepare a genuine "for-attorney, by-attorney curriculum" that focused on lawyer wellness. We started each morning with intentional silence, meditation, and qi gong. During the day, we had access to a variety of wellness activities, including massages, a yoga class, and a hike to a waterfall. We also completed group workshops on setting boundaries, saying "no," learning to communicate better, and combating compassion fatigue in the legal profession.

One of the most inspiring parts of the retreat is that it drew such a diverse group of attorneys – a wise public defender from California, an employment lawyer from New York, an entrepreneurial lawyer/artist from Idaho, a Tennessee youth court judge, several family law attorneys, a law student from Connecticut ... the list goes on. As one of the newest attorneys there, it was very moving to hear stories from more experienced legal veterans. Learning how the wiser people in the room had woven yoga and mindfulness into their routines gave me hope that I could do the same.

Another part of the retreat was working through the things that had been holding us back in our search for mindfulness.

For me, I know that I am a kinder, more fulfilled version of myself when I practice yoga. However, I struggled to commit to a routine because I was so concerned with getting my practice "just right." If I couldn't devote at least one hour every single day to a challenging yoga sequence, I wouldn't do it at all. But that was (clearly) the wrong approach. At the retreat, we talked about how if we practiced mindfulness or did yoga for only 5 minutes a day, that was not a failure but a small win.

The retreat gave me the time and space to really think through what I needed to clear my head. I realized that I needed external accountability and motivation, so I connected with a local yoga teacher in Memphis. I now do two early-morning yoga Zoom classes every week that end with a short meditation. These are usually restorative classes that I show up to in my pajamas, and I have learned to accept and even embrace the imperfection in that. (If you notice that I am a kinder, more focused person on Mondays and Thursdays, thank my yoga teacher Amy Hutcheson.)

As for work productivity, I tried to make small fixes. I noticed that social media and my calendar and phone notifications were hugely distracting – even all my health-minded Apple Watch buzzes were driving me crazy – so I decided to ditch the Apple Watch, press pause on social media, and turn off all computer sounds and notifications (at least when I need to dig into a challenging project). In retrospect, these are all obvious solutions, but it took me finally slowing down and allowing myself the time to think through the obvious to implement them.

I was so inspired by the first retreat that I returned to Gray Bear on my own in the fall. It was the same well of quiet and peace that I remembered. But I have realized that I can create my own Gray Bear solace at home in Memphis, too. I can purposefully plan a Saturday where I turn off all electronics, take a long walk outdoors, read some Mary Oliver, and spend more time listening versus talking.

As a final note, at the end of December, I attended another Yoga CLE with the Memphis Bar Association where we reflected on the last year and set intentions for this new year. It may come as no surprise that I reflected on my time at Gray Bear. Admittedly, the retreat was not a Band-Aid that fixed everything. I definitely still have those days where my mind is full of bumblebees. But at least now I know to remind myself to slow down, take a deep breath, and listen for the whippoorwills.