

PUBLICATION

Open Letters: A Special Bond Between a Working Mom and Her Son

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"A Letter to Charlie"

An open letter to my son, Charlie, a rising 2L at Washington University School of Law in St. Louis, about balance as he embarks on his legal career

My precious Charlie,

The irony is not lost on me that I'm being asked to talk to you about balance. As I've always told you, there truly is no such thing as "work-life balance," despite all the CLEs, wellness workshops, and podcasts, extolling its virtues. As Oprah said, "I've learned that you can't have everything and do everything at the same time." Some days, I pat myself on the back because I'm *killing* it as a lawyer. On other days – mostly on the various and frequent occasions I find myself bursting with pride over the young man you've become – I think, "Wow! I must've done something right as a parent." As I've explained, though, those feelings are essentially mutually exclusive. When I'm successful as a lawyer, I find that I'm lacking as a parent. And, when I'm feeling that I might just know what I'm doing as a mom, I've likely screwed up something at the office. Such is life. And balance. Balance doesn't mean it's a 50/50 proposition. Sometimes, it's a 95/5 kind of deal, and, at others, it's maybe 40/60. But, at any given time, "The obligation for working mothers [and fathers] is a very precise one: the feeling that one ought to work as if one did not have children while raising one's children as if one did not have a job."

As you know, I made a choice when you were very young to work part-time. Not everyone has the luxury of being offered that choice, and I feel so incredibly fortunate that your dad and Baker Donelson provided it to me. That said, balance was still an issue. During those first 16 years at the Firm, I wish I had a nickel for every time someone said to me, "Oh, you're *part-time*? Which days do you work?" And my response was, "Every day. I work. *Every. Day.*" However, I made it a point not to work nights or weekends unless it was absolutely necessary (of course, there were those glory days for us bankruptcy lawyers during and after the Great Recession of 2008 when I was getting up every morning at three to get my work done). That flexibility gave me the ability to make your soccer and football games, your school plays, your field trips. I'd be lying if I said my ego didn't take a hit during those years. When my sweet friends and colleagues, Angie Davis, Beverly Gates, and Emily Landry, were elected shareholders, there was a part of me that fleetingly wondered, "Where would I be if I weren't part-time?" But the thought was truly *passing* because, each time you had a soccer game and looked for me – and found me – in the stands, I knew. Every time I got to escort your class on a field trip, and you proudly introduced me to your classmates as your mom, I knew. With each and every one of your report cards and conduct reports, I knew. I knew that this was the work-life balance I could manage. This was the kind of work-life balance I could enjoy. This was the kind of balance that would make our family happy and whole.

You realize that I can't write this letter to you without talking about the importance of friends, right? That can't be a surprise to you because I've always voiced the value of friendships in my life. What I may not have explained to you, though, is how crucial my friends have been in my maintenance of a healthy work-life balance. Yes, some of my best friends are also women with whom I work or have worked – you've grown up with the amazing examples of Ms. Angie, Ms. Emily, Ms. Beverly, and Ms. Kristine as #GirlBosses – but they

have taught me some of the most treasured lessons about parenting, lawyering, and balance. They've talked me off the ledge when I was worried I'd messed up at work; they've picked you up from daycare when a mediation went long and your dad was out of town and thus unable to collect you; they've set the examples I've tried to follow of being at all of your games, at striving for excellence in my practice, at managing the challenges of being a member of the "Sandwich Generation," and, most of all, at not taking ANY of it too seriously.

One vital part of the balance equation is also your choice of a partner. I had no idea when I married your dad 27 years ago what a huge cheerleader he would be for my career. In addition to bearing the load as the primary breadwinner for most of our marriage and giving me the freedom to choose to work part-time, he was thrilled when I made the decision to go full-time just before you left for college. Since that time, he's never once questioned my working late, my need to travel for a client or client development event, or my choosing to work on a weekend in lieu of helping him with yardwork or housework. In fact, he cheers me on and encourages me to do whatever I need to do to be successful. When I made the decision to put my name in the hat for election as a shareholder a few years ago, to say that he was fully supportive is an understatement. And I believe he was even prouder than your grandparents were when I was ultimately elected shareholder. Having a spouse who is supportive and understanding, but provides perspective is key to your success in your career, in your personal life, in *life*, in general.

Finally, I cannot finish this letter without referencing the meaning and significance of faith in my life and in my work toward work-life balance. You know this very well, and your own faith has been more inspirational to me than you'll ever know. Let it guide you, Charlie. When times are tough, when you're stressed, when you can't sleep because you're reworking the brief you filed that day, when you're second-guessing your strategy in a trial or negotiation, or you've let opposing counsel get under your skin, pray. Even through law school. Even through practice. Trust me on this one.

Only you know what will work for you in terms of balance, Charlie. You've impressed me so much this year with your commitment to Faith, Fitness, Family/Friends, all while successfully managing your workload at WashU, that I'm fully confident you'll find that balance, if you haven't already done so. At a minimum, I humbly hope that I have served as an example – I wouldn't dare to say a "role model" (remember what I said about being terrified that I'd committed malpractice???) – of what it means to strive for balance in a challenging, demanding career. I've told you so many times that, even if I haven't loved every single day of my career – I mean, it's not ALL sunshine and roses – I **love** being a lawyer, and I've *never* regretted my decision to go to law school and to practice law. My prayer for you is that you find your practice to be every bit as fulfilling, challenging, exciting, and fun (yep, I'm serious: **FUN**) as I have. I'm immeasurably, wholly, embarrassingly proud of you. You're going to make an extraordinary lawyer. I knew it when you were a little guy, and your teachers were amazed at the creativity and complexity of your writing, and I know it even more so now, as you've completed your first year of law school. Always remember, though, that balance means that you should never be so busy making a living that you forget to make a LIFE. I love you.

"A Letter to My Mother"

By Charlie Evans

Anything will try to dictate and determine your identity if you let it. The demands and rigors of the legal profession make it especially effective at doing so. Since I entered law school in the fall, people have often asked me whether I felt like I had a step up since my mom is a lawyer. Though neither our dinner conversations introduced me to Establishment Clause jurisprudence nor our long car rides explain the minimum contacts test from *Pennoyer v. Neff* (though, to be fair, I'm not sure that a semester of Civil Procedure fully did, either), I do feel I've had a definite advantage on my peers who didn't have the exposure to the legal profession that I've been able to have. Looking back at my 1L year, the main way having a parent

who is a lawyer has benefited me has been through learning the importance of, and pursuing balance between my work, and my life outside of law school.

Balance has always been something with which I've struggled, but it has become something I've sought to improve over the last few years even before I had decided to go to law school. I'm generally a pretty competitive person, and high school provided an easy opportunity to push and compete with myself academically. I certainly worked hard, but I didn't work well. Studying often came at the expense of being with friends, allowing myself time to read for fun, or just generally relaxing outside of academic breaks. For example, I remember a Tuesday night during my senior year when my high school girlfriend asked whether I wanted to get dinner together. Even as a senior, I was incredulous that she'd ask to hang out on a school night.

Luckily, once I got to college, I quickly realized this posture toward work wouldn't be sustainable. Indeed, it wasn't even necessary. A full life outside of school didn't have to come at the expense of success in it, and vice versa. My mom's example in her own work began to surface in my mind as the sort of balance that I might want to pursue. Why it took moving and living six hours away for me to realize that my mom might be a source of such substantive professional advice is beyond me – but it's one item on the laundry list of mysteries and gifts of being able to go to college, I think. Regardless, the distance from home gave me an opportunity to realize that not only was a work-life balance possible but that I was a product of it in many ways.

My mom has been a lawyer for almost 30 years, and she has always practiced as long as I've been around. As admirable as that is to me, she hasn't just been a lawyer for that time. She's been a wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend, church member, traveler, chef, avid podcast listener, and a host of other things. All while working in one of the most demanding professions one can pursue. So, while I am a son of a lawyer, I'm also a son of all the various roles my mom has juggled. While all these things have always certainly served as a testament to how awesome she is, they have also served as an important example for me as I began to make steps toward pursuing my own career. Not only is it possible to work well while also living well, but I think cultivating such a balance can produce respective benefits to both work and life outside it. For example, I can remember my mom coming home buzzing from a successful trial as I can also remember her going to work buzzing after having spent a weekend with her best friends from high school.

So, the possibility of a work-life balance and its potency to enhance one's work and life respectively were major lessons I learned from my mom's experience in the legal profession that I carried with me to begin law school this past August. But, my mom also consistently reiterated that though she loves her job and wouldn't want to do anything else, there are significantly easier ways to make a living. My first year of law school has certainly given me a glimpse into that reality, and it quickly challenged the work-life balance that I had begun to pursue the last few years.

Law school will certainly take over your life if you let it. Once you tell someone you graduated from college in May and that person asks what you're doing now, telling them that you're now a law student can be a concerningly exhaustive, complete description of your life as a whole beyond the narrow question of what you do. Indeed, it's remarkable how much law school dominates even simple conversations between 1L's.

"How was your weekend?"

"Oh, I was working on the rough draft of the brief, so, you know."

"Did you watch the Succession episode last night?"

"No, I haven't had time to watch TV since we started law school."

"What'd you do Fall Break?"

"Just got a jump start on outlining."

Law school so far represents what I can only imagine is a precursor to the legal profession. It tries to take claims on your life as it makes promises about what it can offer if you'll let it make those claims. You can fall into doing a sort of ridiculous algebra: Would I be better served studying an extra hour or by getting dinner with a friend for an hour? Would I be in a better position by doing Thursday's reading early or going on a walk on the first sunny day in weeks?

It's often not as clear cut as those questions, and I'm sure such choices between work and life are even less clear in actual legal practice. But, as my mom has often repeated to me, balance rarely means doing both things well simultaneously. For example, she's told me that the days she was a killer lawyer sometimes resulted in her forgetting I had a soccer game that night. Days she was able to have meaningful conversations with me and my dad may have meant missing a conference call. There's no such thing as perfect balance when it comes to imperfect people. From my direct law school experience, I can think of meals on Saturday nights I skipped early in the semester for getting ahead on readings or researching employers I'd apply to over Christmas break. On the flip side, we just had a weeklong writing competition to earn a place in one of our law journals. Though I might have been better served and ultimately less stressed had I started it the day the competition opened, I went to a Taylor Swift concert instead. Admittedly, though, I can't say I regretted that decision and I think my considering skipping the concert to do Bluebook citations is the most salient example I could give of the space law school can take in your head. All that being said, where my mom's experience in her career has demonstrated to me that a work-life balance is possible and important, it's affirmed that it also requires you extend yourself a measure of grace in trying to be successful in both respects.

If my legal career is anything like my law school experience thus far, I know it will try to claim more from me than it could ever give back. I plan to be the best lawyer I can be, but I also plan to be the best person I can be. Looking to my mom's experience as an attorney, I'm confident that one doesn't need to come at the expense of the other, and I'm looking forward to continuing to develop such a balance myself.