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### LETTER TO KELLY

John Lande

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## LETTER TO KELLY

DECEMBER 1, 2017 | JOHN LANDE | [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

Out of the blue, I got an email from a student at my university who I had never met. She said that her best friend is graduating from college this month and will start law school in the fall. As a graduation present, she is collecting letters with advice for her friend and she asked me to write one. So I sent her the following letter, except that I changed the names.

I invite readers to add your thoughts and other resources to share in a comment below as this link will be provided to Kelly. What would you add or change in this advice? During this exam season, reflecting on these issues and giving your advice may be a welcome break.

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Dear Kelly,

Your friend Lee obviously cares about you a lot. She asked me (and others) to write a letter to you with advice about law school. So here goes.

Studying law and using your legal training may be both exhilarating and daunting. I believe deeply that lawyers generally play an invaluable role in our society. We often help people solve difficult problems, promote justice, and make relationships and institutions function properly. The letter and spirit of the law are the foundation of our society.

On the other hand, lawyers deserve some of the criticism we receive. We are part of an adversarial legal system that too often perpetuates unproductive conflict, is inefficient, helps the “haves” to come out ahead, and disempowers people.

So my first piece of advice is to keep focused on your goals and how you can best achieve them. Pay attention to the effects of the law and your work. Many law graduates practice law in a wide variety of contexts – and some do all sorts of other things. Commit yourself to doing some good things that law-trained people do.

I imagine that you have seen a lot of TV shows and movies portraying lawyers and perhaps even law school life. I think that they generally distort reality **a lot**. What's called the "hidden" law school curriculum also creates misimpressions by focusing so much on appellate cases. Although it's important to understand the logic of appellate case analysis and the legal doctrine you will read, these cases represent only a small fraction of what most lawyers actually deal with in their work. Appellate case analysis reflects significant hindsight bias and over-emphasis of the role of law as opposed to facts, interests, and emotions. In practice, lawyers experience cases prospectively with large amounts of the non-legal elements, which often dwarf any uncertainty about the applicable law.

So I suggest that you develop a healthy skepticism about these images and do what you can to learn how legal practice really works. I think that you will be a lot happier and more effective if you have realistic expectations.

As you proceed through law school and a career after graduation, you will become initiated in a tribe with a new language and customs. This can produce a great sense of belonging and power as you learn how to use the law. It is easy to forget how (what I facetiously call) "normal people" view the world. You still are a normal person – don't forget what that feels like. Balance your work with a healthy home life so that normalcy is a regular part of your life.

Law school probably will be a lot different from your undergraduate experience. I believe that most law school faculty really care a lot about their students and work hard to help students learn what's important. Unfortunately, the system of legal education in the US has been rightly criticized for too often doing a poor job of preparing students to practice law.

So don't simply assume that you will be adequately prepared if you just "check all the boxes" you need to graduate. Don't give in to the temptation to do as little work as necessary to get an acceptable grade.

Instead, get the full advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity by taking the initiative to carefully plan your curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Be prepared to continue learning throughout your career. Law is constantly changing with new statutes, court opinions, and procedures. Expectations about lawyers may change. Rapidly-evolving technology probably will change legal practice. Be on the lookout for these and other changes and prepare yourself to deal with them.

Generally try to see the world through others' eyes. This is not only a good thing to do as a human being, but it is very important to be an effective professional. If you practice law,

you will probably feel frustrated at times with some of your clients and people on the other side of litigation and/or transactions. The better you understand their perspectives and empathize with their concerns, the more you can avoid unnecessary conflict and effectively represent your clients.

Take good care of yourself. Law school and legal practice are extremely stressful. Law students and lawyers often abuse alcohol and other drugs and suffer from mental health problems. If you are having problems, don't stuff them. Get help. And if you see colleagues having problems, try to help them get help.

For more detailed advice, I encourage you to read my former colleague, Steve Easton's, article, *My Last Lecture: Unsolicited Advice for Future and Current Lawyers*, and my sequel, *My Last Lecture: More Unsolicited Advice for Future and Current Lawyers*, as well as my article, *Escaping From Lawyers' Prison of Fear*. This is probably a lot more to read than Lee had in mind. But you will need to get used to doing a lot of reading – and this is easier than most of what you will read in law school.

In closing, I wish you great satisfaction in law school and wherever you go in life.

Sincerely,

John Lande

Isidor Loeb Professor Emeritus

University of Missouri School of Law

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