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How to be ‘rewarded’ as an attorney

New York Times columnist David Brooks wrote an excellent column in mid-May titled “Putting Grit in Its Place.” In the column, Brooks cites recent research which finds that those students and professionals motivated by an altruistic end — rather than that of, say, money — generally possess more “grit,” or perseverance.

Brooks puts it this way: “Grit is thus downstream from longing. People need a powerful ‘why’ if they are going to be able to endure any ‘how.’”

We know from literature and the news that attorneys have for some time now been facing a period in the profession where the traits of perseverance and “grit” are not only important, but indispensable due to fundamental market shifts.

For instance, in a chapter of an American Bar Association book published last year, Jayne Reardon, executive director of the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism, noted that technological innovations have forced many attorneys to reconsider their business models, particularly where online forms have in some cases allowed consumers to bypass attorneys altogether.

Despite the potential for non-attorney observers to view this development as yet another chink in the armor of the profession’s utility, Reardon wisely intones that, in this scenario, attorneys should “recognize that the value they bring to clients transcends mere provision of legal information,” and that an attorney’s judgment is of great value in and of itself.

BY MARGARET O'MARA FROSSARD AND JOSEPH A. KEARNEY

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Lawyers currently doing their best to persevere during a difficult market should also remember that the struggle to define one’s self within a legal career is not new.

In 1993, professor and former Yale Law School dean Anthony Kronman suggested the profession was in a “crisis” caused then not by lack of “material success,” but rather by a lack of morale among attorneys, which Kronman in part attributed to the diminishing ability for attorneys to sacrifice and contribute to the public good.

Roscoe Pound went further decades earlier in the face of a question regarding the state of the legal profession at that time to write, “Pursuit of the learned art (law) in the spirit of public service is (our) primary purpose.”

Which brings us back to that all-important element of altruism and focus on the public good that Brooks notes, “To be critical to our ability to channel perseverance and grit. How do we develop a sense of altruism? Regardless of the practice area in which you presently find yourself, the an-

swer — most immediately — can be ‘volunteer work.’”

We know that merely recognizing volunteer legal work as useful and right will not alone get the job done. Despite the formal expectations placed upon us as lawyers to either donate or provide pro bono services, a relative few of us regularly volunteer our legal skills. Time is usually the main impediment.

However, consider taking a few minutes during a brief lull in your work to consider what motivates you in a legal setting — is it pursuit of justice?

Representing a traditionally underrepresented population? Promoting the arts? In Chicago’s robust not-for-profit world, there are multiple organizations that would likely be happy to connect a willing attorney to a potential client in all of the above — and innumerable other — categories.

The career services offices of many law schools are happy to refer alumni to such volunteer opportunities and keep lists for that very purpose. Also, most bar associations have divisions dedicated to connecting practitioners with organizations and clients seeking attorneys in a pro bono capacity.

An entire book could be devoted to how we as attorneys — and as a profession — can strengthen our altruistic outlook, leading to the benefits of added “grit,” perseverance and satisfaction in our professional identity.

However, even if we do not immediately pick up the phone to find a pro bono volunteer opportunity, perhaps it is enough today to become more mindful of the goal of public service and altruism.