

“Happiness Isn’t What You’re Looking For in Your Work”

Tapping Into That Which Lights Us Up

By Caitlin L. Dillon

At my commencement speech at my law school graduation in 2014, Chief Justice Charles W. Daniels challenged us to consider public service as an essential part of our duty and responsibility as lawyers in New Mexico. He called on us to use our education and unique talents to solve problems that we identified in our community. Many of us would heed his advice, pursuing careers in public service and at non-profits and advocating for those without a voice while seeking to rework systems that no longer serve the greater good. In short, we choose to make working for the greater good our job.



Working in public service is a great honor, however, it can also be a great burden. In her latest book, *The Lightmaker’s Manifesto: How to Work for Change Without Losing Your Joy*, Karen Walrond defines activists as “the people who quietly and diligently work behind those turbulent scenes for good and justice—those who daily activate their own gifts and talents and determination as part of a larger cause” (Walrond, 2021, 13-14). Those of us in public service may be freed from the trappings of billable hours, however, the obstacles we face are numerous and systemic.

Each day, we are confronted by resources that constantly lag behind demand. Most days, the systems we use do not address the actual problem. Yet, despite these limitations, I consistently see public servants accomplish the seemingly impossible. These advocates tackle the impossible through a combination of grit, teamwork, creativity and limitless resiliency. We stubbornly hang on to hope, showing up day after day. Walrond writes, “there’s no one way to change the world. The world changes when we take inspiration from all the different forms of good and light and make them our own” (Walrond, 2021, 15).

After a long day, week, or year I’ve often asked myself the question, “why am I here?” I think we’ve all been there. In public service, we have BIG responsibilities. We make sure people are taken care of because that’s our job and our calling. We answer tough questions, make decisions and often work in an adversarial environment. If we don’t do our jobs successfully, things break down. In addition to this

pressure, we have demonstrable outcomes to prove to the public and legislature that we are worth the investment. Our performance is constantly measured with little recognition of true, inestimable progress. Everything is tracked: outcomes, number of people served, reports generated, salaries, etc. With all of this, how do we continue to work for change without losing our joy and burning out? How do we “proactively take the things that fuel us—our gifts and our passions—and use them to serve the world” (Walrond, 2021, 13)?

Yoga, sleep, time off, meditation and exercise can only do so much for our state of well-being. We do those things because maybe they’ll make us feel better or maybe we’ll be happier. You can do all those things right, and still be profoundly unsettled, without direction or purpose. By tapping into the “things that ‘light us up’...we can use them in ways that serve the world while...helping us to maintain our determination, cultivate resilience and even tend to our own spirits” (Walrond, 2021,13). Take a moment to think about the things that light you up and recognize what that feels like in your mind, body and spirit. Walrond hypothesizes that, by “being purposeful in using our gifts and talents as fuel for our commitment to serve, even in a world of tremendous pain and injustice, we can minimize the possibility of burnout—or even avoid it altogether” (Walrond, 2021, 13). However, this process requires a “considerable amount of introspection and forethought” (Walrond, 2021, 14). There’s “no one way to change the world. The world changes when we take inspiration from all the different forms of good and light and make them our own” (Walrond, 2021, 15).

For starters, we need to think about what we want to feel differently. What is joy? What does it look like? What does it feel like? Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote in *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World*, “It’s wonderful to discover that what we want is not actually happiness... Joy subsumes happiness. Joy is the far greater thing.” (Lama and Tutu, 2016, 32). This is because “joy often sits alongside suffering” (Walrond, 2021, 23). In *Atlas of the Heart*, Brené Brown defines joy as “an intense feeling of deep spiritual connection, pleasure, and appreciation.” (Brown, 2021, 265). Happiness and joy are different. Joy is “sudden, unexpected, short-lasting, and high intensity. It’s characterized by connection with others” (Brown, 2021, 264). Happiness is “stable, longer-lasting, and normally the result of effort... With happiness, we feel a sense of being in control... happiness seems more external and circumstantial” (Brown, 2021, 265). When we experience joy, “we don’t lose ourselves, we become more truly ourselves” (Brown, 2021, 265). Experiences of joy can be hard to describe, and they are the experiences that we remember and carry with us through our practice. Think about when you have experienced joy and how that felt in the moment. Do you reflect on that experience when things are hard?

A second consideration is integrity and staying rooted in our values. Our values bring us to public service, and they can carry us through our service. Walrond describes integrity as “staying the course even when it seems like things aren’t getting better... it means forging your own path with your own skills and gifts” (Walrond, 2021, 68). This is hard enough to do in your personal life, let alone professionally. Brené Brown writes in *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution*, “Integrity is choosing courage over comfort. It’s choosing what’s right over what is fun, fast or easy. It’s choosing to practice your values, rather than simply professing them” (Brown, 2015, 123). You don’t tackle the big problems in public service without courage. We see and work in some very harsh realities. We stick around because we’re here to get it right, and we’re here to tackle the big problems. Think about the values that you hold, and how you use those values to practice courage every day. Our values become the path forward. It doesn’t have to be perfect; we just have to be committed “to aligning our values with our actions” every single day (Walrond, 2021, 72-73).

The last and arguably most important consideration is how empathy, compassion and kindness are integral to public service and advocacy. “Compassion and empathy are superpowers... empathy and compassion usually manifest themselves... through kindness” (Walrond, 2021, 78). It is very difficult to be kind in public service because we

encounter individuals and systems in crisis. We become the sounding board for their feelings and grievances. We end up on separate sides of issues in adversarial proceedings because of the individuals or entities we represent. It can feel isolating. However, kindness can be a way of “affirming our shared humanity,” and connecting with people on all sides, including our co-workers (Walrond, 2021, 81). Kindness does not mean “accommodating to a fault” (Walrond, 2021, 82). You can

hold someone accountable and do so in a way that does not compromise your integrity. You can mindfully listen to others with empathy. Walrond writes, “to advocate for others in an honorable way, we need to be able to look at ourselves in the mirror and like who likes back” (Walrond, 2021,

82). When we choose to act in alignment with our values by using empathy, kindness and compassion, we can experience joy.

The experience of joy in public service ebbs and flows. Some days will be harder than others. However, we will experience joy in the most unlikely and unexpected places. There is a rhythm and a flow to this work. Some days you fight really hard, and some days you have to slow down, and settle in for the long haul. “Any moments of joy we can curate and cultivate can counterbalance the stress we face in work” (Walrond, 2021, 138). We can’t fix everything all at once. “Be clear on your scope of control and influence, approach your issue with a beginner’s mindset, and maintain a sense of curiosity” (Walrond, 2021, 117). Ask yourself, “what will make me feel healthy today? What will make me feel connected today? What will make me feel purposeful today?” (Walrond, 2021, 200). Do the things that you need to do to maintain your emotional, mental and physical health to have longevity in your practice. Your talents and gifts make a difference in this community. ■

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