



By Caitlin L. Dillon

Baking. Cooking. Sourdough starters. Puzzles. Musical instruments. Biking. Walking. Knitting. Home improvement. Yoga. Reading. Drawing. Weightlifting. Bullet Journaling. Podcasts. Meditation. Zoom book clubs. Running. Woodworking. Tai-Chi. Gardening. Hiking. These are just a few of the hobbies we discovered (or re-discovered) while navigating the global pandemic. Hobbies are welcome distractions to our structured professional lives. They are anchors that delight, intrigue, and define us, providing us powerful connections to our passions and how we find meaning in our lives. As discussed in Elizabeth Segran's book, *The Rocket Years*, hobbies are best defined as "the activities that you do for pleasure in your leisure time" (Segran, 2020, p. 43). Hobbies were first promoted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as "productive leisure...as an antidote to the dangers of destructive pastimes...fear that time spent not working would be time spent getting into trouble."¹ There was an early understanding that this useful direction of attention provided a distraction from the more unpleasant aspects of work.

There's something very prescient in that early promotion as we reflect on our experiences in the recent year. As we moved through COVID-19, many of us searched for new things to fill the time void and ease isolation woes. Research shows that spending time on hobbies is generally good for your health. According to a 2015 study, "increased leisure engagement is associated with greater positive mood, less stress and/or more stress coping, and better cardiovascular health."² People with hobbies "tend to be less depressed...and show more interest in the world around them, which is a marker of

good mental health." (Segran, 2020, p. 44). This means that the hobbies you have now, and have yet to discover, can change your day to day life in a very real and meaningful way. Hobbies allow you to "cultivate parts of your identity" outside of your professional life and close relationships. External forces become less essential in defining who you are and what makes you happy. Neurologists have discovered that learning new skills "can slow down age related decline and stimulate new brain cell growth...pushing yourself to learn new skills throughout your life can help keep your mind nimble and sharp." (Segran, p. 57). These are key assets to long term career success.

You may be asking yourself, "hobbies are clearly beneficial, but how do I fit them into my busy life?" Good question. In order to successfully integrate hobbies into your own life, you have to be deliberate and decide that they are worth the time and effort. You need to believe that they will improve your quality of life, whether that is reducing anxiety or giving yourself freedom to be creative. The next step is creating time for your hobby. The quickest and easiest way to do this is actively clocking out of work and shutting off your notifications on your cell phone. You'll be surprised at how much time is available once you stop looking at texts, emails, and everyone else's life on social media.

Now that you have time, make sure you're picking a hobby that "cultivate[s] or express[es] some part of yourself that does not come out at work or at home." (Segran, p. 56). A hobby should be challenging yet familiar. As lawyers, we are often stuck inside, glued to multiple screens, dealing with difficult people and their

corresponding problems. Choose a hobby that is the opposite of the challenges or stressors you experience at work or home. For example, an introvert may need solo activities outdoors, while an extrovert might seek out team sports or community projects that encourage positive human interaction. Hobbies can also be things like working out or cooking your meals for the week. Both encourage creative expression and also provide opportunity for learning new skills, while also achieving practical benefits to your health. Everyone likes a two for one deal.

The key to unlocking the benefits of hobbies is consistency and practice. James Clear writes in *Atomic Habits*, “it is so easy to overestimate the importance of one defining moment and underestimate the value of making small improvements on a daily basis. Too often, we convince ourselves that massive success requires massive action.” (Clear, 2018, p. 15). Earth-shattering improvements are rarely the result of a singular act. You did not become a proficient trial attorney or accomplished legal writer overnight. It was more likely the result of getting 1 percent better each trial, brief, or motion. According to Clear, “habits are the compound interest of self-improvement...we make a few changes, but the results never seem to come quickly and so we slide back into our previous routines.” (Clear, p. 17). This is why developing new hobbies or good habits gets increasingly harder as we get older. Research has found that “at the age of twenty-five, the patterns in your brain start becoming hardwired, resisting your efforts to create new ones.”³ (Segran, p. 60). It is “the accumulation of many missteps—a 1 percent decline here and there—that eventually leads to a problem.” (Clear, p. 17).

While this may seem like dire straits, the good news is that it's never too late to rethink your leisure time. Making a conscious choice to engage in a habit or hobby that is “1 percent better or worse seems insignificant in the moment, but over the span of moments that make up a lifetime *these choices determine the difference between who you are and what you could be.*” (Clear, p. 18). Are your choices and your behaviors putting you on the path to success not just as a lawyer, but as a person? “Prevailing wisdom claims that the best way to achieve what we want...is to set specific, actionable goals.” (Clear, p. 23). However, our achievements have more to do with the path that we followed to get there rather than the specific goal we set. “Goals are about the results that you want to achieve. Systems [or paths] are about the processes that lead to those results.” *Id.* The goal in

any sport is to finish on top, “but it would be ridiculous to spend the whole game staring at the scoreboard...if you want better results, then forget about setting goals. Focus on your system instead.” (Clear, p. 24).

Achieving a goal is temporary, it is one moment in time that often continually puts off happiness. Making time each day or week for meaningful hobbies allows for a “cycle of endless refinement and continuous improvement” in your life and health. (Clear, p. 27). “The more pride you have in a particular aspect of your identity, the more motivated you will be to maintain the habits associated with it.” (Clear, p. 33). This is why hobbies are crucial to our health and identity as human beings. Too often we are myopically focused on our identities as lawyers, forgetting that we are far more than the esquire after our names or the person in the suit. So get out there. Walk into that gym. Knit a scarf. Ride a bike. Open the puzzle. Bake a pie. Take a walk. Plant a tomato. Whatever it is, it doesn't have to be perfect, it just has to be yours. ■

Caitlin L. Dillon is a prosecutor in the State of New Mexico.

Endnotes

¹ Steven M. Gelber, *Hobbies: Leisure and the Culture of Work in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 1).

² Matthew J. Zawadzki, Joshua M. Smyth, and Heather J. Costigan, “Real-Time Associations between Engaging in Leisure and Daily Health and Well-Being,” *Annals of Behavioral Medicine* 49, no. 4 (August 2015): 605-15.

³ Carl J. Casperson, Mark A. Pereira, and Katy M. Curran, “Changes in Physical Activity Patterns in the United States, by Sex and Cross-sectional Age,” *Medicine and Science in Sports & Exercise* 32, no. 9 (September 2000): 1601-09.

