SARA J. BERMAN

Embrace Today's Silver Linings

Let positive thoughts about the process and the future keep you on track, then work slowly and steadily to succeed

Bar exam preparation—successful bar exam preparation—requires months of full-time work after law school graduation. Law school success requires three years of hard work, four years for part-time students. Succeeding at your first law job requires intense focus and incredible effort. But in each of these there are silver linings.

Really? How can I possibly think that taking on mountains of work—the marathons that are law school success and bar exam preparation—could possibly coexist with renewal and rejuvenation?

If the world has taught us anything recently, it's that we may not always—or even usually—control all of what happens to us, but we can often control our reactions. We can make lemonade out of lemons. And, perhaps even more important, we can learn to see lemons as glorious fruit. Painful experiences often prove to be the most empowering life lessons.

Perhaps you're in the crowd who view having to take a bar exam as a lemon. You may well have important insights into better ways to license attorneys than bar exams. You're not alone. Researchers are hard at work studying what minimum competency to practice law means and how best to assess it. If you haven't read it, check out Building a Better Bar [https://abaforlawstudents.com/iaalsbar].

Law students aren't yet those who decide licensing requirements. To become a member of the bar when you graduate law school, you must get licensed however your jurisdiction requires. But you'll have more and more input into those questions and all sorts of aspects of how to continuously improve our profession.

So keep all your thoughts on bettering the system alive, but don't let them distract or deter you from your immediate goals. Keep reading, keep thinking, and keep engaged in the governance of our profession. Get licensed as soon as possible after you graduate, and do the best legal work you can.

Think this, not that

To do that, ask yourself this question: How will I approach this crazy, rough bar prep phase—or the challenges of finishing law school or the battles of first law jobs?

What will be your daily thought process? How will you react to the struggle, one that's normal and a necessary part of achieving success? And how will your actions complement, or be thwarted by, your thoughts and wholly understandable inner doubts?

It's *possible* that the way you choose to approach the massive challenges ahead may empower you; you may actually take this new phase on as a step toward new and exciting paths. Consider that renewal can sometimes be found in adopting new ways of thinking. As examples:

- I'm such a lazy person binge-watching this show when I should be studying.
  I'm letting my mind rest and recharge so it'll have more space to fill with new learning after this well-deserved break.

- I have to go exercise.
  How lucky I am that my body is allowing me to move? And exercising now is helping me to study and learn more effectively. It's a positive outlet for the stress I so legitimately feel right now.

- I hate cleaning my home.
  I'm lucky to have housing, and I'll be healthier, happier, and more productive in an organized space.

- I can't believe my professor assigned 50 pages of reading. Doesn't she realize we have other classes?
  This professor is hard on us because she believes in us and wants us to be incredible lawyers. The more I read, the better reader I'll become. And critical reading is to lawyering as catching and throwing are to professional baseball.

- Why are things so hard?
  My challenges are huge because I'm doing big things. If I didn't see what I'm doing as tough, I wouldn't be appreciating the seriousness of it all. This is difficult, and I can do this. It'll take a lot of daily, steady work, but I have access to helpful resources, I'm bright and determined, and I can do this.

Have you ever come to a realization that made you view the exact same thing in an entirely new way? Maybe you know a parent who plays music to relax, thinking he's indulging his own hobby. But at some point, you realize that singing or playing an instrument with his child is helping the child, providing a host of positives.

I always remind students who are parents of studies that show that just reading in front of your children will have a positive impact on helping them achieve academically.

Think differently, then act

When *thinking differently* is coupled with action, it can be permanently transformative. Some people who legitimately feel physically vulnerable have gained extraordinary confidence from Brazilian ju-jitsu classes

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for safety and empowerment. In just months—and often despite massive skepticism that new students feel when they begin workshops—they can learn concrete tools, moves, and attitudes that help manage fears and replace them with confidence for life.

Let's say what you're thinking is:

- "I can't believe I have to take yet another exam. Isn't passing three or four years of law school classes enough?"
- Or: "Why didn't they keep those emergency diploma privilege paths in place so I could just begin working already? All I want to do is give back to the world, and I'm stuck in a two-month bar exam limbo land."

Legitimate thoughts. (All thoughts are legit!) But where do they get you if you must do this? If they get you to anger, that *might* be a motivator. But for many, the only place they get you is resentment—too often a mud-like place where all you feel is stuck and sluggish.

What if you could feel good instead of resentful about the process? Maybe you can. Maybe that's within your control. Sometimes changing words themselves help change the outcomes. Consider the difference it has made in our world when we discuss "mental health and well being" rather than talking just about "mental illness."

What would you say if you were advising a classmate on how to make the best of this time? What do you imagine you'd tell yourself a year from now looking back on whatever challenge you're now facing?

The first key is to reframe negative thoughts into positive ones, just like we did above. Again, that may sound something like rephrasing, "I have to take the darn bar exam" so that it becomes, "I've worked this hard so that I get the opportunity to sit for this exam that will allow me a lifetime of rewarding, important work."

The next key is to take three empowering actions:

1. Set the stage now. Clear your obligations and make sure you have a safe place to live and study and the means to support yourself during bar prep. If you're still in law school, talk with your financial aid officer now to put a solid plan in place so that you can live for at least two months after graduation without any income. Note: Maintaining financial health and safety will assist in all challenges, even if you've long ago passed the bar exam.

2. Find your why. This is your purpose and your motivator. Write what drives you to want this law license, or any challenge you're facing, and keep your words where you'll see them daily.

3. Choose gratitude. Remember that your immediate workload, or whatever phase you're in, is temporary, but studying is a gift. You'll graduate, and you'll pass the bar. And you'll remain a lifelong learner. Learning new facts and skills is how we earn our living as professionals; it's how we grow and stay relevant.

Slow and steady wins

So it's OK to be annoyed and frustrated. It's OK to feel whatever you feel. But consider the power of positive transformations driven by reframing thoughts and then taking decisive strategic actions. Engage in positive messaging toward yourself as you would to encourage others. Often the most effective actions are daily, regular, and consistent—small, steady actions.

Rome wasn't built in a day. People who haven't exercised in years who try to run miles too often feel painful setbacks and give up. Those who start with daily walks, then slowly increase their time and intensity, often persist and prevail.

The same is true with practice tests. If you're in law school or studying for the bar exam and haven't yet taken practice exams but you set out to complete a two-day, closed-book simulated exam, you might well get too discouraged to continue. But you'll get there if you start by struggling through one practice exam daily, even when you think you don't know the material.

In fact, studies show that's often a better way to learn what you don't know and then retain the information. Then take one more, then another, and keep at it each day—studying sample answers, completing rubrics, and rewriting better answers—building up to two full days of testing.

Your *thoughts* must say, "I can do this. I can write passing answers within the allotted time, for any and all questions on the exam." And your *actions* must build knowledge and knowledge frameworks and refine and improve required skills. That way, you get to where you need to be when it's time to perform.

I *want* to say, "Trust me! I've taught thousands to pass bar exams nationwide." But better advice is, "Consider the evidence and decide for yourself." Studies resoundingly substantiate that extraordinary power flows from positive thought coupled with strategic action.

We control so much less than we imagine around us. At the same time, we control so many more of our own thoughts than we realize. The actions necessary to achieve our goals often feel like climbing massive mountains—and they may be. But even the highest peaks are conquered one step at a time.

So do you want this? Can you envision yourself as a lawyer or in another professional role using lawyering skills? Maybe you want to be a business owner or political leader? Try seeing yourself as that powerful person—that lawyer, that leader—then taking the steps needed to be really good at whatever you do.

And thank you! Thank you for all the hard work you're putting in. You're our future leaders. You're the guardians of the rule of law. You're voices for the voiceless. You're policy makers. You're important, and getting your law license is an indispensable step on your very important professional path.

Pursue this phase with as much positivity as you can muster. After the work, pain, and sweat will come the knowledge that you *are* making a difference. You're building a career that will help countless others while supporting yourself and your family.

Every day is building. Even when you feel stuck, lift yourself with uplifting thoughts. Then take slow and steady daily actions to meet your goals. You'll feel renewed and recharged and ready to meet the present challenges—and to then make and succeed at new goals. ■

SARA J. BERMAN is a legal education thought leader specializing in student success, teaching and learning, and bar exams. Her most recent books include *Bar Exam MPT Preparation & Experiential Learning for Law Students* [abaforlawstudents.com/mptbook/] and *Bar Exam Success: A Comprehensive Guide* [abaforlawstudents.com/barsuccess/]. Berman leads student success research initiatives at the nonprofit AccessLex Center for Legal Education Excellence. The views expressed here are Berman's and not those of her employer.

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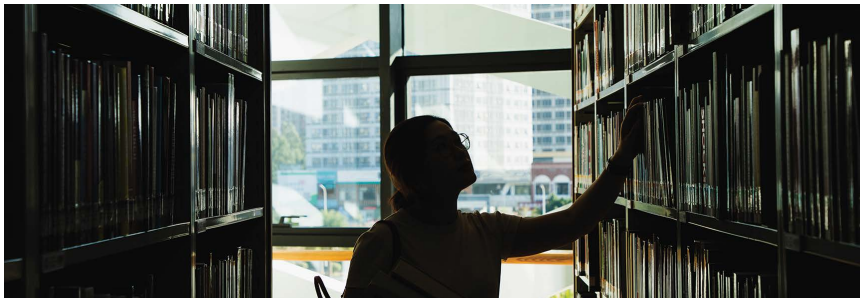

Bar Planning Dovetails with Career Planning

If you haven't yet found your place in law, you're not alone. The process of planning to pass the bar exam can help you get there.

When I meet with law students, I often ask, "When are you passing the bar exam?" I watch their faces. They're expecting, "When are you *taking* the bar exam."

My twist usually creates a pause, sometimes an awkward smile or nervous laugh, as they realize the underlying assumption. I can see them take a beat as they assess what passing means to them.

Bar passage isn't an end goal. Few people take and pass bar exams as a purely intellectual exercise. Assuming you pass the MPRE, character and fitness, and any other state-specific requirements, passing the bar exam opens the door to "becoming a lawyer."

The real question is: Do you truly want to be a lawyer?

Law school "confessions"

There's a presumption that everyone taking the bar exam wants to pass. That's not true. Some law students believe they're not ready to or don't want to *be* lawyers, professionals responsible for the lives and livelihoods of others.

Graduating law school and passing a bar exam (unless you're in Wisconsin and until alternate paths to licensure become widely accepted) aren't simply steps to getting a decent job. They're how we *become* lawyers, a lifelong identity.

Even those who don't practice law think of ourselves as lawyers, albeit nonpracticing lawyers.

Some students go to law school to fulfill another's dream; others pursue law as a placeholder because they haven't yet found a career path they're passionate about. Many students "confess" weeks before the bar exam that they don't want to be lawyers. I say "confess" because it's too often shared as if it were a shameful secret, reflecting deep imposter syndrome and underlying fear.

But it's completely legitimate and wholly understandable to not be "ready." Starting college with an undeclared major is fine; similarly, you don't have to know what type of law you want to practice when you're in law school. You don't even have to want to practice law. Many people very successfully transition into nonpracticing careers, using law degrees to enhance work in business, education, politics, entertainment, and countless other fields.

Finding your why

Identity shifting is a process; it's not a switch that flips the moment you're admitted to law school. But it's much easier to succeed in law school and pass the bar exam if you're holding onto at least some clear reasons why you really want the license.

If you're someone "secretly" carrying around a sense that you don't belong; if you haven't yet found passion in law or are in law school to fulfill someone else's dream, know that you're not alone, and there's nothing *wrong* with you. Talk with a trusted mentor. Read about the lives of many different lawyers. Consider the wide range of influence lawyers have in our society. And find your *why*.

Maybe it'll be an elective or clinical course that sparks your passion. Or maybe it'll be role models you identify with—people who've used their legal education to make a difference in our world—who create in you a sense of purpose. Maybe it's a book or movie about a trial that changed peoples' lives for the better.

Or maybe it's everyday lawyers whose advice to families helps make buying a house, getting divorced, or losing a loved one easier.

And know that you aren't expected to go it alone the minute you pass the bar exam. Considering how competitive law school often is, we're a strikingly collaborative profession. There are always lawyers willing to mentor recent graduates. There's a ton of continuing legal education. There are countless guides, training materials, books, and videos, not to mention credible networking and advice you can obtain through responsible social networking.

But the earlier students grapple with their identity transition from student to professional and get comfortable with their why (knowing it will evolve), the better.

Note: It's important to acknowledge that there are many legitimate reasons law students may feel they don't belong. Law schools and law students together must work hard to create learning environments in which a diversity of students feel invited to participate authentically in all learning opportunities. And, just as with finding your professional "why," it can be incredibly helpful to talk through any other law school challenges with a trusted mentor.

Often all you need is one person, one smart, empathic person who knows law school and gets it—someone who gets and supports you. Start with student services, academic support, student organization leaders, or a professor with whom you feel comfortable as resources to help you find someone safe and supportive to talk with.

Back to the future

Preparing for the bar exam and securing your first legal jobs aren't easy. But they're much easier if you're all in. Being "all in" requires three Ps: preparation, practice, and persistence—all of which are easier if you have goals in sight, believe there's value in bar studies, and remain positive.

Do you have a professional or

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career goal to look forward to? Does it help to have a job secured before taking the bar? Yes. For those who are lucky enough—and persistent enough (and, given the job market, it takes both luck and grit)—having something lined up provides a concrete light at the end of the tunnel.

But there are other ways to find light at the end of the legal education tunnel. Start by seeing yourself as a professional. Get comfortable with it. Practice in front of the mirror introducing yourself as the newest member of the bar in your jurisdiction.

As I always say, your law license is a power tool for social change. It's an investment in yourself—and worth all the effort you're putting in. Total commitment now will enable you to do good and do well for a lifetime. Believe in what you're working toward.

Career services professionals often advise students to keep actively looking for jobs until bar prep begins. But once you're in your two months of total bar immersion, study full time and be *all in* for bar prep. Keep resumes handy so that you can send one off during a study break if you happen to hear about a position. But defer job hunting until after the bar.

It'll be much easier to secure a first position if you've passed your first bar exam. So focus on bar studies as if nothing else matters. Give it everything you have. When it's over and you pass, you never have to do it again. But you'll have the necessary foundation to launch your professional career, to dig in and see which jobs are best fits for you. (And you'll likely have many different positions through the years.)

Remember that studying for the bar exam can help prepare you for law practice. There's a lot wrong with the current bar exam, and according to many recent studies (including Building a Better Bar [abaforlawstudents.com/betterbar], this sort of high-stakes summative assessment doesn't adequately measure minimum competence to practice law.

And it doesn't help us be better lawyers. For starters, law practice is most often open book and isn't typically "speeded." Indeed, acting on behalf of a client without looking up rules and taking time to analyze the facts and law would, in most cases, be malpractice.

The Uniform Bar Exam is being updated, and many states are rethinking their own exams. Legal thought leaders are calling for the elimination of bar exams altogether.

But so long as you have to take the bar exam, it's helpful to find something worthwhile in the process. Try. Try hard. It creates cognitive dissonance to believe something you're spending so much time and money on isn't worthwhile. It blocks effective learning to see this massive effort as simply an obligatory and outdated hazing ritual.

So how do you see value in bar preparation? Here are some ideas.

You might see tremendous value in daily, intensive engagement in critical reading and logical analysis. Those skills, along with effective writing, are the tools of our trade. You're starting *and cementing* a lifelong habit of continuous improvement in critical reading, knowledge acquisition, and problem solving.

You can see value in affirming your ability to withstand high-pressure situations. Dealing with courts, administrative agencies, opposing counsel, and clients often is stressful. Developing coping tools and inner strength is vital.

Total commitment now will enable you to do good and do well for a lifetime. Believe in what you're working toward.

Learning a little about many areas of law—even those you won't end up practicing in—will contribute to your general knowledge. And your knowledge base will help you process new information because that new info will have existing mental structures to connect with. You'll know terminology and develop a sense of when and where to refer future cases out. You'll understand when you have to look things up. And you'll have a foundation to begin the research you'll do in practice.

You may even enjoy some parts of the exam, such as the multistate performance test. Many lawyers report that performance tests do have parallels to practice and help train skills you'll use in legal work.

Keep your glass half full. Law school is a professional school; you're working for a degree and lifetime license that will help you earn a living while helping others. Look at the hard work performed by most people who are good at what they do—in any field. If you're working toward something that feels worthwhile, you can enjoy the process. Read more in *The Progress Principle: Using Small Wins to Ignite Joy, Engagement, and Creativity at Work* by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer [abaforlawstudents.com/progressprinciple].

Much of our professional and life success, and our happiness along the way, is guided by our outlook. In bar prep and in life, we'll make mistakes. We must fight so that challenges don't become blocks. We must embrace the notion that hard work won't stop us from going back in each day and fighting to improve.

We must see every misstep as an opportunity to improve. For example, as you study and get wrong answers on practice tests, know that's not a predictor of doom but an opportunity to determine why you erred and make corrections for the next exams. Error-generating learning makes for lasting knowledge. With sufficient, fully engaged practice *before your exam*, you set yourself up for ultimate success. The "practice" never ends.

As this pandemic has taught us, in our personal and professional lives, only one thing is certain: We'll be thrown curve balls. And we'll find fulfillment and be happier if we embrace our challenges as *opportunities for improvement*. There's a reason we call it the *practice* of law! ■

SARA J. BERMAN is a professor at Touro Law Center in New York and a legal education thought leader specializing in student success, teaching and learning, and bar exams. Her most recent book, *Bar Exam Success: A Comprehensive Guide* [americanbar.org/products/inv/book/385629451/], contains no-nonsense advice based on decades of law teaching and bar review experience and numerous empirical studies.

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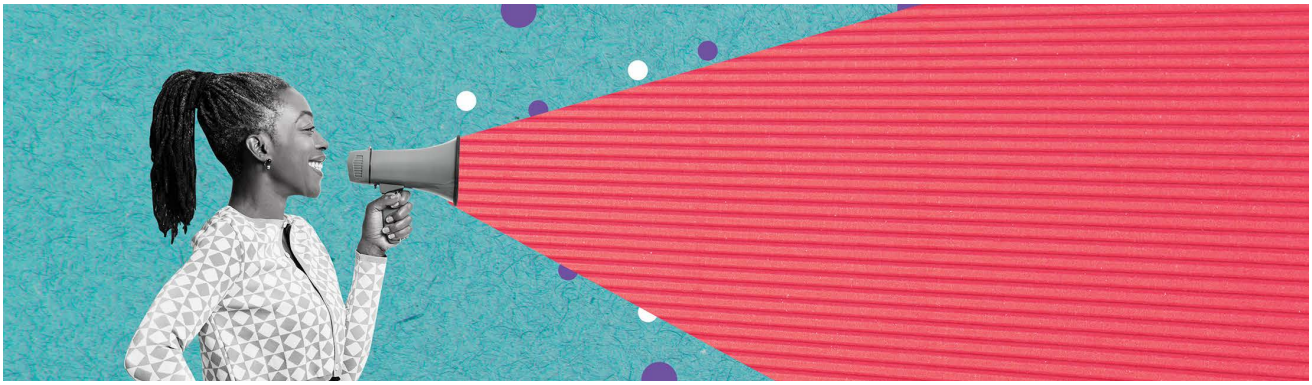

Justice, Justice Shalt Thou Pursue

Why it helps to craft a personal mission statement and declare your law school purpose.

Having worked remotely during the pandemic, it's with fresh eyes that I now walk through the law school, pausing to take in its sights and sounds. On the walls, works of art depict social justice and civil rights movements—many with powerful messages and compelling photographs—proof beyond a reasonable doubt that law and lawyers matter.

Hanging in a number of offices are beautiful paintings with the Biblical phrase: "Justice, justice, shalt thou pursue," some also in Hebrew, which transliterated into English is: "Tzedek, tzdek tirdof."

I love seeing the word *justice* prominently displayed in a law school building. It serves as a constant reminder of why we're here.

I recently posted the law school's mission statement on my office door, with a question: "What is your mission?"

A living, changing document

I urge every law student to craft a personal mission statement, to find and declare some purpose with which to undertake and persist undergoing the rigors of legal education and bar prep.

Your mission statement will be a living, changing document, to be sure. But it's important to take time for yourself each semester to think about why you've embarked on this challenge and where you're heading.

Your mission statement is private, just for you. It may articulate the values that drive you or the goals you're heading toward. It may reflect the kind of lawyer you want to be. It may focus on your role within the legal system or your sense of responsibility to make that system the best it can be for everyone.

There's no right mission, but here are some examples:

- My goal is to do my best and work my hardest as I prepare to become an advocate for my future clients.
- I'm studying to be a smart, savvy, ethical lawyer capable of supporting my family and myself and doing work that helps others.
- I'm driven to learn how the law can serve historically underrepresented people and to train so that I'm best prepared to help steer society toward an equitable and inclusive future.
- I'm working to be part of a profession that will allow me the financial security I never had when I was growing up.
- I'm dedicating myself to detail-oriented deep learning as I work to achieve a respected position within the legal community.
- I'm committed to developing the knowledge and skills to help and inspire others while being true to myself and making my family proud of my accomplishments.
- My focus is on learning from my successes and my challenges during law school, preparing for a lifetime of hard yet meaningful work, and developing the strength to deal with what I know will be life's inevitable curveballs.

When you know you're doing something worthwhile, it's easy to put in long hours. New parents often feel this way—even after never-ending sleepless nights and other overwhelming challenges. We see this sense of purpose in athletes' faces during and after competitive sporting events; the struggles are visibly worth all the pain.

Similarly for law students, when you believe the knowledge, skills, and license you're working so hard to acquire will serve you well—for a lifetime—it's easier to accept (possibly even welcome) the challenges.

And spoiler alert: Law school shouldn't be easy. It must become more inclusive and more connected to the profession. And it should become more collaborative and less competitive—training for teamwork, problem solving, and alternative dispute resolution rather than its previously nearly exclusive focus on litigation. But it shouldn't be easy. The profession isn't easy.

If you don't feel deeply challenged or haven't yet experienced reading until your eyes hurt or struggling to understand a complex legal doctrine, ask yourself if you need to step up your game. Remember that you must be prepared not only for years of intense study and months of bar prep after graduation but also for a lifetime of difficult though incredibly rewarding work.

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The many meanings of *justice*

So I return to my question: "What is your mission statement?" As you contemplate why you chose law, and as you consider the values you believe are worth fighting for and the goals you're working toward, I invite you to think about the word *justice*.

Justice, according to *Black's Law Dictionary*, is "the fair and proper administration of laws." There's also, of course, a secondary definition as a term for certain judges, typically in appellate courts, such as U.S. Supreme Court justices.

But what's meant by "the fair and proper administration of laws"? Fair for whom? What happens when the administration of laws isn't proper? Why does that matter? How do you develop the strength to stand up and say no when asked to violate the law?

Law-dictionary.org lists as the primary definition of justice: "The constant and perpetual disposition to render every man his due." Aside from the gendered aspect of this phrasing, what's the meaning? What exactly is someone's due? Does it differ depending on what the person knows, what background the person has, what the person's intent was?

Of course. First-year students know this from reasonable person and other tests in torts. They also know it from distinctions between levels of intent in criminal law and differences in nearly every course about how and when particular rules should apply.

Would it help as a 1L and as a graduate reviewing bar subjects to contextualize legal education as learning to seek, advocate for, implement, and defend justice?

I hear the cynics saying, "Yeah, right. We started law school to pursue our values but soon in started thinking it's all about vast influences of money, power, and the status quo."

There are plenty of reasons to become cynical and to turn off, including the first-year focus nearly exclusively on learning how to reason by reading past judicial opinions, with little, if any, room for creativity or personal opinion. But drafting and frequently reviewing a mission statement can help you remain true to your own values as you struggle through the process.

The passion with which you entered law school may find new expression as you move into upper-division coursework, take interesting electives, and delve into experiential and clinical work. You may also find new sides of yourself. But you'll still be you. And after you graduate, you'll have additional tools to help influence change.

So take time now to look at yourself and ask who you are and who you want to be. In class, when responding to or asking questions, when you participate in oral arguments, write for and serve as an editor on a journal, or represent clients in clinics, ask yourself what you believe in and how you want to be known by others when you're a working professional.

Consider for a moment the great statue of Lady Justice. She's pictured holding a sword (representing authority and force) and scales (which relate to balancing the equities and the strengths and weakness of each side's evidence). She wears a toga (indicating being philosophical and thoughtful) and a blindfold (to convey impartiality).

What will you be wearing to personify the kind of lawyer you want to be? What will you hold in your hands? What will you be open to seeing or hearing, and how will that impact your thinking?

A foundation to return to

I can't *guarantee* that crafting a mission statement and leaning into your own professional identity will help you rise to the top of your law school class or pass the bar exam the first time around. But I'm certain that having purpose and meaning helps, a lot. (One of my favorite law professors reminded us frequently, "Toasters come with guarantees; lawyers do not." Alas, a lot of life has no guarantee, but finding helpful tools is a step in the right direction.)

Many law students understandably find it too depressing to face difficult times when they don't even see a tunnel, let alone light at the end of it. Rather than finding ways to recharge or get help so they can see a brighter future, they check out.

Don't check out. And don't give up.

When you're feeling tired or demoralized by the challenges of law school, imagine looking into the eyes of a client you helped. When you're fed up with bar preparation, take a quick study break to read, listen to a podcast, or watch a video about a lawyer who made a great difference in some cause that matters to you. And know that you're closer than you might realize to being that advocate, that counselor, that problem solver, that leader—that person who makes a difference.

Hang on and hang in. Graduate, pass the bar exam, and let your evolving mission statement help guide you to a lifetime of doing good and doing well.

And know that the effort *is* worthwhile. For all the lawyer jokes, for all the disparaging of our profession (and admitting that, of course, there are some unethical lawyers, just as in every profession), remember that we lawyers are responsible each and every day for so much of the good that happens in our world.

We right wrongs. We defend people who are wrongly accused. We help people secure housing and raise and provide for their children. We help develop lawful policies and procedures for new frontiers in technology and intellectual property. We push to uphold existing laws and advocate for new laws that protect fundamental rights. We defend our environment, our democracy, and our world.

We have much to work on as a profession. But we also have much to be proud of.

What are you committed to working on? And what would make you most proud of if you were looking back on your legal career 20 years from now?

What's in your mission statement? ■

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Want to Pass the Bar Exam? Start Saving Money

Success depends on your ability to focus, and your financial burdens can invade when you haven't planned for them.

Most bar prep advice stresses review of the law and taking practice tests. These are incredibly important parts of the process and integral components of the post-graduation intensive study required to pass.

I, too, have written about motivating to study and how to study smart. And bar review and practice exams are certainly key building blocks. But there is more.

In my bar success books and articles, I often begin with what I call *finding your why*. Many don't acknowledge that piece, but research confirms that finding purpose and meaning in the process makes most challenges easier. That includes bar exam preparation, especially on discouraging days—of which there are many. Everyone who's all-in struggles; it's perfectly normal.

Lately, I've been thinking about two other interrelated success components: focus and finances.

Both are essential, and they're integrally connected to one another. Without a solid financial footing (for what is a far costlier venture than many realize), it's nearly impossible to engage in the sort of in-depth focus needed for law school, bar exam, and your professional success.

A focus on focusing

Is paying close attention to words and ideas a lost art in our world of splintered attention? Notifications and messages fly into our in-boxes, constantly interrupting our flow. It's tough to block out disruptions and focus on any one thing. It's particularly difficult during bar review since nearly all study content is housed on the very same machines that steal our attention: laptops, phones, and tablets.

It *was* different when the TV (or whatever other antiquated machine took our focus) was in one room and bar review books were in another. Books don't DM. They don't contain endless rabbit holes that lead to online shopping, YouTube videos, social media, and other temptations.

Studies show that if your phone is near you, even face down, your thoughts will be diverted to what's coming in on that device. Today, news stories run tickers with blurbs about every hot story. Watch virtually anything on a screen and pop-ups will flash, prompting additional content to interest you.

It's extraordinarily difficult to be in any one moment without advertisers pushing what's next. They know how easily our attentions are shifted; they bank on it. And, for some reason, we've let our complex world tell us, and we've come to expect of ourselves, that we're capable of watching and listening intently *while* reading and thinking. We can't.

A splintered focus may be sufficient to grasp the gist of a funny pet video but not to learn legal doctrine. It's not possible to fully embrace the kind of deep learning necessary to become an excellent lawyer with fragmented input and no time to think and digest.

When was the last time you read anything until it made sense without something else stealing your attention? I'm not talking about getting through the words, highlighting here and there. I'm talking about fully engaging with the words and the ideas they convey. I'm talking about closing the screen after reading passages to give yourself

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the time to make mental connections, to understand how rules fit together, why there are exceptions, and possibly even to indulge in thinking about how the law might or should evolve.

Legal learning requires close, detailed reading *and* reflection. Be honest: Do you read the notes and questions before and after cases in your casebooks? Do you ask yourself:

- What actually happened to the parties?
- Why did the court focus where it did?
- What did the court decide?
- Is the decision a new rule or an extension of or an exception to an existing rule?
- Does the rule apply in other contexts? Always?
- Why does any of it matter?
- Why did the author select this part of this case, and how does it connect to other pieces of this course?

It's not that everything takes hours to understand. It's that you'll attain the requisite deeper level of focus when you let yourself dive into material without 12 simultaneous diversions invading your brain space. And make no mistake, the multitude of distractors that sabotage our ability to focus are invaders.

Money is a distraction

One of the most powerful invaders, something that legitimately and deeply detracts from law study and bar prep, is financial worry. Recent empirical studies, including AccessLex and NYBOLE's Analyzing First-Time Bar Passage on the UBE in New York State [accesslex.org/NYBOLE], show that financial worries are a significant factor in bar failure. National and school-specific data also reveal high stress levels relating to finances.

When students graduate with as much debt as they often do, little helps to tamp down the ominous worry clouds, the "How will I ever repay *all* of this?" Such long-term fears are compounded by an immediate post-graduation challenge: how to finance eight weeks without work or student loans.

Why are graduates in this position? One reason is that many don't realize until it's too late that they'll need to finance months of post-graduation bar study. Others think they can effectively keep part-time jobs *and* complete bar prep.

But the AccessLex/NYBOLE study found that working during bar review poses a key obstacle to passage. It makes sense that when working bar takers are in the same grading pools as nonworking applicants, the latter group has an obvious edge. And those who aren't working but are without sufficient funds and are worrying about how they'll eat or pay rent aren't just slightly disadvantaged; it's nearly impossible to focus when you're in survival mode.

How much does bar prep cost? Well, the cost of living for at least two months varies significantly by region. In some places, $2,000–$3,000 per month will suffice; in other locations, it's much more.

Then there are bar review courses that can range from several hundred to several thousand dollars for reputable, full-service courses. Next there are costs to take a bar exam, including jurisdiction exam fees, special "laptop fees," travel to and from test sites, and lodging and food at exam locations.

These costs vary by jurisdiction. They start in the low hundreds, such as in Washington, D.C. (as of this writing, for first-time takers it's $205 with a laptop fee of $145), and New York (first-time takers pay $250, with a laptop fee of $100). They escalate into the thousands, such as Florida (first-time takers pay $1,000, with a laptop fee of $145) and South Carolina (first-time takers pay $1,000 along with a laptop fee of $125.50).

Check your jurisdiction's website to be sure you know the costs. And apply on time. If you miss deadlines, there are late fees on top of the regular fees.

Wait! There's more.

Beyond the bar exam, other components are required for licensing, including character and fitness, the MPRE, and, in some jurisdictions, state-specific exams. All have additional costs. Adding it up, plan on about $10,000 for bar-related costs—and that's excluding private tutoring, if needed. (Talk with your academic success program faculty before hiring a tutor.)

Solutions? Save enough to finance at least two months without working after graduation. Tap into budgeting websites and free resources for law students in financial literacy programs, such as MAX by AccessLex [accesslex.org/max-by-accesslex].

Think about daily savings. Make your own coffee instead of hitting the coffee shop. Take public transportation, and share living spaces with roommates. Make regular appointments with counselors in your financial aid office to discuss the loans you take, and put some money aside each semester for post-graduation bar prep. If you have a safe, reliable network you can ask for financial help or advice, do so.

Circling back to where we began, if your finances are under control, you can work on training your general ability to focus. Focus, like mindset, isn't fixed. We can increase our ability to think deeply and critically. Practice every day. All of the following can help:

- Meditation
- Finding quiet places to study
- Leaving your phone in another room while you study
- Disablking notifications and instant messaging
- Setting email and social media "office hours" so you check only when you need a study break anyway
- Pushing back invaders that pop into the inbox of your mind
- Starting with small blocks of full focus and increasing the time gradually, building up to three-hour blocks that mirror what will be required for bar success.

This isn't easy. Magic bullets won't appear. The study and practice of law are hard and require deep focus—something that's not trendy or what we're used to in our fragmented world. But it's doable.

Ultimately, you must control your bar prep. Don't let it control you. Start concentration training, and start saving money—now. This is an investment in you and in your future, and it will pay off. ■

SARA J. BERMAN is a legal education thought leader with expertise in student success, teaching and learning, and bar exams. She's a professor and assistant dean at the Touro Law Center in New York. Her latest publications include step-by step guides to contracts, torts, and criminal law [sarajberman.com/success-in-contracts-torts-and-criminal-law/] and Bar Exam Success: A Comprehensive Guide [americanbar.org/products/inv/book/385629451/].