

# 1L as a Gemini

By Deanna Parrish\*

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In late May, looking west after sundown, Castor and Pollux form a bright O-like shape in the summer sky. The geometry of these two stars encourages the mythological link between their namesake astrological sign, Gemini, and ideas of twinship, multiplicity and choice. Born under this zodiac, I truly inhabit its tendencies. I am cursed with curiosity, leaving me a nomad with multidisciplinary interests. The year before law school meant I moved four times along the East Coast and pursued three different jobs. My undergraduate days were peppered with courses across majors and clubs, from student radio to student organizing. Even so, I was drawn to law school because each of my seemingly discordant interests intersected with the law in an important way. Knowing the law, I believed, would empower me to negotiate between them. By the time I landed in Cambridge, my smile overflowed with ambition and optimism, drunk on the idea that I was entering a test lab for the future of democracy.

On a damp day in August, a very green version of myself chatted all too loudly with a classmate in Langdell Library. At one point they asked, “So, do you want to clerk for the Supreme Court?” I naïvely answered. “That sounds like it would be a lot of fun! I’m currently reading Justice Sotomayor’s autobiography, and as a Latina, respect her work on and off of the bench.” My colleague

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was frozen. I saw the words fun run across their brow as if trying to decipher a code, spelling out letter-by-letter, while simultaneously feeling pity and awe at my naiveté. They retorted, “You might want to figure out which Professors feed to which Circuit Court judges and which of those feed to SCOTUS. You need a plan. Without a plan, there’s no hope.” *It was day three of orientation.*

So began my fumbling climb up a steep learning curve, where I continuously felt as though I was not privy to the blueprint for success my peers were following. The first half of my 1L year became about finding that blueprint—the elusive list of opportunities and accolades that I, or any right-minded law student, should be seeking—and following it as closely as I could. Suddenly, the open-endedness of my ambitions was narrowed to a vocabulary of traditional goals. Where the diversity of my academic and personal interests once necessitated negotiation, the single tracking of my law school pursuits effectively eliminated it. The Gemini in me had camouflaged itself in a lexicon of new priorities.

What may appear as self-sabotage was not so much a choice as a survival mechanism. Ambitious people are primed from an early age to chase accomplishment. In the foreign environment of law school, I was trying to do the same. However, operating this way took its toll. There was a click in my chest that rose with me every morning. With those palpitations came a cycle of nausea and migraines. When I slept, my dreams were stained with anxiety of being unable to thoughtfully follow the mental gymnastics of class, of embarrassing myself in front of my peers, of being inferior—fears that followed me into classrooms and sometimes realized themselves. Most importantly, there was less multiplicity, less negotiation, in my life. I felt

as though I had little choice in the type of person I was becoming.

With Thanksgiving came fear. Family members, with pride in their throats, would ask me how I liked school. I was not used to disappointing them, and did not want to start now. I rehearsed a response, not too far from the truth. Out of love or fear, my well-intentioned family of non-lawyers assured me that the first year was the hardest. Try not to be so sensitive, they said. However, studies show that student stress levels appear to increase over the course of law school.<sup>1</sup> In fact, levels of depression and anxiety have been found to be significantly elevated two years after graduation.<sup>2</sup> While stress can be a motivating factor, sometimes incentivizing high performance, as Joshua Riff, medical director for Target Corporation, clarified in a recent panel at the Harvard School of Public Health, “[i]n the workplace, ... the wrong amount of stress can be a bad thing.”<sup>3</sup> For lawyers and lawyers-to-be, this “bad thing” translates to remarkable mental health outcomes.

The statistics vary, but studies estimate that between 20 to 40 percent of law students suffer from clinical depression or other mental illness by the time they graduate.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Larry Krieger of Florida State University (FSU) reports that the incidence of clinically elevated anxiety, hostility and depression among students is eight to fifteen times that of the general population.<sup>5</sup> For me, this

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<sup>1</sup> See Peterson, Todd and Peterson, Elizabeth Waters, *Stemming the Tide of Law Student Depression: What Law Schools Need to Learn from the Science of Positive Psychology* (2008). GW Law Faculty Publications & Other Works. Paper 871, [http://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/faculty\\_publications/871](http://scholarship.law.gwu.edu/faculty_publications/871) (citing Nancy J. Soonpaa, *Stress in Law Students: A Comparative Study of First-Year, Second-Year, and Third-Year Students*, 36 CONN. L. REV. 353, 377-78 (2004)).

<sup>2</sup> See G. Andrew H. Benjamin et al., *The Role of Legal Education in Producing Psychological Distress Among Law Students and Lawyers*, 11 AM. B. FOUND. RES. J. 225, 245 (1986).

<sup>3</sup> Chuck Leddy, *The Mess Left By Stress*, Harvard Gazette, (Jul. 10, 2014), <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2014/07/the-mess-left-by-stress/>.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g., Benjamin et al., *supra* note 2; Kennon M. Sheldon & Lawrence S. Krieger, *Does Legal Education Have Undermining Effects on Law Students? Evaluating Changes in Motivation, Values, and Well-Being*, 22 BEHAV. SCI. & L. 261, 261 (2004); G. Andrew H. Benjamin et al., *The Prevalence of Depression, Alcohol Abuse, and Cocaine Abuse Among United States Lawyers*, 13 INT'L J.L. & PSYCHIATRY 233, 233-34 (1990).

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence S. Krieger, *Institutional Denial About the Dark Side of Law School, and Fresh Empirical Guidance for Constructively Breaking the Silence*, 52 J. LEGAL EDUC. 112, 114 (2002) (citing G. Andrew Benjamin et al., *supra* note 2).

condition of learned-mindlessness, of rejecting self-care in exchange for self-preservation, was the true indoctrination of 1L year. It is also the necessary foundation upon which the staggering statistics on lawyers' mental health outcomes rest: from the same FSU study, out of 104 occupational groups, lawyers rank the highest in depression and fifth in the incidence of suicide.<sup>6</sup> As such, lawyers are 3.6 times more likely to suffer from depression than non-lawyers.<sup>7</sup> These findings are surprisingly consistent across studies, indicating disparate mental health outcomes for lawyers over time.

Pinpointing the exact source of anxiety in law school seems unfair, particularly in a place that has invested above average attention into the health and wellness of its students. Harvard is one of only a handful of law schools with a website dedicated to wellness resources<sup>8</sup>; as of 2008, it abandoned letter grades, long considered a primary source of stress for students<sup>9</sup>; counseling services are made available as a part of the mandatory student health fee; and the administration does its part to warn students by opening orientation with a frank disclaimer on the staggering statistics of alcohol and chemical dependency within the legal profession.<sup>10</sup> I recognize the unique privilege and access to resources that comes with being a Harvard student; and, I also know that I am not alone in my desire for a more self-aware law school experience,<sup>11</sup> in Cambridge as well as across the country.

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.* at 114-115.

<sup>7</sup> William W. Eaton et al., *Occupations and the Prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder*, 32 J. OCCUPATIONAL MED. 1079, 1083 (1990).

<sup>8</sup> See Peterson, *supra* note 1, at 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 33.

<sup>10</sup> One study found that of a sample size of practicing lawyers, 70% were likely to develop alcohol-related problems over the course of their lifetime, compared to just 13.7% of the general population. See Connie J. A. Beck, Bruce D. Sales & G. Andrew H. Benjamin, *Lawyer Distress: Alcohol-Related Problems and Other Psychological Concerns Among a Sample of Practicing Lawyers*, 10 J.L. & HEALTH 1 (1995).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Becky Beaupre Gillespie, *Mindfulness in Legal Practice Is Going Mainstream*, The American Bar Association Journal, (Feb. 1, 2013),

For me, this self-awareness was found in the reintroduction of daily negotiations of choice in my life. My perceived sense of helplessness was shattered when I realized that experience is only a function of how you choose to invest your time. To change my 1L year, I would have to reclaim it. In moments stolen away from my studies, I discovered what my own self-care required. Enough sleep. Enough greens. Enough movement. Enough laughter. Turning my attention inward during a time otherwise concerned with others felt novel. But it was in fact a homecoming: a spark of my inner Gemini was back. Of course, self-care does and should differ for everyone. As such, I offer no prescription other than for law students to keep their internal conversations active when the noise around them gets louder.

My ultimate vision is a law school experience that honors the diversity of its students' interests and prioritizes the sustainability of their personal and professional success. However, an atmosphere is not easily reformed when it is rooted in student expectations and reactions, and further perpetuated by an institution's historic commitment to a particular brand of excellence. While engineering a law school experience devoid of stress may be impossible, learning to negotiate stressors and prioritize self-care can, and should, be paramount for students.