

HOW A PERSON OF FAITH CAN ADDRESS IMPOSTER SYNDROME IN LAW SCHOOL

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Imposter syndrome, which psychiatrists Pauline Rose Clance and Suzanne Imes initially identified in 1978 as imposter phenomenon, makes people feel as if they are frauds and others will soon find out that they do not belong.¹

Imposter syndrome typically affects high achievers, which include law students and lawyers.² Prominent individuals who have admitted to suffering from imposter syndrome include Maya Angelou,³ Michelle Obama,⁴ United States Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor, Tom Hanks, and Serena Williams.⁵ 61.8% of students at a law school responded in a survey that they “had frequent or intense imposter syndrome experiences”—the law school surveyed was Harvard Law School.⁶

Imposter syndrome permeates law school and the legal profession.⁷ It affects men, women, first generation law students, people of color, and other historically underrepresented individuals such as people in the LGBTQIA+

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1. *Imposter Syndrome? 8 Tactics to Combat the Anxiety*, YOURABA (Oct. 2018), https://www.americanbar.org/news/abanews/publications/youraba/2018/october-2018/tell-yourself_yet—and-other-tips-for-overcoming-impostor-syndr/; Kirsten Weir, *Feel Like a Fraud?*, *gradPSYCH*, Nov. 2013, at 24.

2. See KATHRYNE M. YOUNG, *HOW TO BE (SORT OF) HAPPY IN LAW SCHOOL* 22 (2018).

3. *Why Feeling Like a Fraud Can Be a Good Thing*, BBC NEWS (Apr. 25, 2016), <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-36082469> (quoting Maya Angelou, “I have written eleven books but each time I think ‘Uh-oh, they’re going to find out now’ . . . I’ve run a game on everybody, and they’re going to find me out.”).

4. Valerie Young, *Unpacking Michelle Obama’s Impostor Syndrome*, IMPOSTOR SYNDROME INST., <https://impostorsyndrome.com/article-featured/unpacking-michelle-obamas-impostor-syndrome/> (last visited Apr. 25, 2022).

5. Katherine M. Caflisch, *Imposter Syndrome: The Truth About Feeling Like a Fake*, AM. SOC’Y FOR MICROBIOLOGY (Aug. 14, 2020), <https://asm.org/Articles/2020/August/Imposter-Syndrome-The-Truth-About-Feeling-Like-a-F> (noting Justice Sotomayor and tennis player Serena Williams suffered from imposter syndrome); Robert A. Creo, *Our Chosen Business: From Impostor to Imposing Counsel!*, 41 PA. LAW. MAG, Mar.–Apr. 2019, at 14 (stating Justice Sotomayor and actor Tom Hanks suffered from imposter syndrome).

6. Amanda Chan et al., Opinion, *Wellness at the Law School: Promises to Keep and Miles to Go Before We Sleep*, *Harvard Crimson* (Mar. 29, 2018).

7. YOUNG, *supra* note 2.

community.⁸ Law schools can provide resources and tools for law students to address imposter syndrome,⁹ but a person of faith can approach imposter syndrome in unique ways.¹⁰ This Article sets forth the various ways a law student of faith can confront imposter syndrome.

YOU BELONG HERE

Imposter Syndrome is premised on someone feeling like they do not belong and others will figure out they do not belong.

Law students sometimes feel that the admissions committee made a mistake in admitting them to law school and/or that they tricked the law school into admitting them.¹¹ As a former member of a law school admissions committee, I know the immense efforts undertaken by admissions committees to ensure they are only accepting students whom the committees truly believe will succeed in law school.

Once you are admitted to law school, that means you belong. You are a law student. You do not need to “fake it ‘till you make it” as you already made it. Even though you may make mistakes during your time in law school, as everyone does, you deserve your seat in law school. You will also continue to

8. Leslie P. Culver, *The Rise of Self Sidelining*, 39 WOMEN’S RTS. L. REP. 173, 189 (2018) (stating both men and women are affected by imposter syndrome); Christyne J. Vachon, *Tiaras, Queen Bees, Impostors and the Board Room: Lean in & Women in Corporate Governance*, 9 J. BUS. & TECH. L. 279, 289–90 (2014); Susanne Aronowitz, *A Secret Epidemic in the Legal Profession: Imposter Syndrome*, 77 OR. STATE BAR BULL., Aug.–Sept. 2017, at 36 (“Imposter syndrome is particularly pronounced among . . . women, racial minorities, LGBT, disabled or first-generation professionals.”); Barbara J. Dawson, *Seeing and Believing—The Superpower of the Judicial Intern Opportunity Program*, A.B.A. LIT. J., Fall 2019, (stating “first-generation professionals and others who do not see an abundance of role models who look like them may disproportionately fall prey to such doubt.”); Michelle Silverthorn, *First-Generation Lawyers: The Next Diversity Frontier*, LEGAL MGMT., Apr. 2018, at 12 (noting young first-generation lawyers experience a higher incidence of imposter syndrome).

9. David A. Grenardo, *The Phantom Menace to Professional Identity Formation and Law Success: Imposter Syndrome*, 47 U. Dayton L. Rev. 369, 376–83 (2022).

10. A law student’s (and lawyer’s) professional identity can and should include their faith. See Isabelle R. Gunning, *Lawyers of All Faiths: Constructing Professional Identity and Finding Common Ground*, 39 J. LEGAL PROF. 231, 269 (2015) (“The spiritual or religious lawyer’s internalized moral core is an aspect of professional identity for all lawyers.”); Neil W. Hamilton et al., *Empirical Evidence That Legal Education Can Foster Student Professionalism/Professional Formation to Become an Effective Lawyer*, 10 U. St. Thomas L.J. 11, 29 (2012) (“[F]aculty members . . . create[d] a curriculum and a culture in which each student can develop the knowledge and skills essential to becoming an excellent lawyer while also forming an ethical professional identity integrated with the student’s faith and moral compass.”); Robert K. Vischer, *Moral Engagement Without the “Moral Law”: A Post-Canons View of Attorneys’ Moral Accountability*, 2008 J. Prof. Law. 213, 232 (2008) (stating that legal organizations, such as the Christian Legal Society, the International Association of Jewish Lawyers and Jurists, and the National Association of Muslim Lawyers are “designed to facilitate the integration of an attorney’s faith tradition with her professional identity.”).

11. Susan Grover, *Personal Integration and Outsider Status as Factors in Law Student Well-Being*, 47 WASHBURN L. J. 419, 430 (2008).

develop your skills (such as critical reading and analysis) as you continue through law school, which is different in many ways to undergraduate studies. All law students should hopefully recognize these statements are true.

A person of faith also believes that God has a plan for every single one of us. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”¹² When we listen to God, we are called to follow the path God made for us. That path has now brought you to law school, and you must know that God does not make mistakes. This is where you are meant to be.

YOU ARE CHOSEN

Imposter syndrome involves comparing oneself to others even though comparison is the thief of joy as Theodore Roosevelt once said.¹³ It is only natural for law students to compare themselves to others especially when law schools grade on a curve and some students will compete with each other for the same jobs.

When Samuel in the Old Testament was sent to the house of Jesse to find the next king of Israel, he met seven sons who looked like they were fit to be king. After seeing one of Jesse’s sons, Samuel thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed” is before him.¹⁴

“But the Lord said to Samuel, ‘Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.’”¹⁵

Samuel met every single son of Jesse except the very youngest and smallest, David, who was tending the sheep, but when he met David, Samuel anointed David as the next king.¹⁶

The fact that you are in law school reveals that God chose you to be here. And regardless of whether you fit a mold in your mind about what a law student or lawyer should look like, talk like, or act like, understand that you have been chosen by God for law school no matter what others see.

YOU ARE WORTHY

Imposter syndrome can make a law student feel as if they are not good enough because they believe their classmates are smarter, better speakers, more

12. *Proverbs* 3:5-6 (New International Version).

13. See Jeff Ross, Shanna M. Stephens & Erin Dean, *It’s Not All About the Dollars: Three Different Approaches to Incorporating Wellness into Your Daily Life*, S.C. LAW., NO. 2019, at 54, 61 (2019).

14. 1 *Samuel* 16:1-6 (New International Version).

15. 1 *Samuel* 16:7 (New International Version).

16. 1 *Samuel* 16:10-13 (New International Version).

proficient writers, or more well-connected in the legal world than they are.¹⁷ Law school humbles people, and insecurities may surface when you attend law school. Imposter syndrome exacerbates those insecurities. Using your faith to face those insecurities is critical.

One of the central figures in several religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, also felt completely unworthy of what God asked of him. When God came to Moses to tell him that God would be sending Moses to the Pharaoh of Egypt to free the Israelites from captivity, Moses questioned God, “Who am I that I should go...?”¹⁸ What if they do not believe me...?” Moses then tells God that he is not an eloquent speaker. Even though God assured Moses that He would be with Moses and Moses would accomplish God’s will, Moses still told God, “Please send someone else.”¹⁹ God sent Aaron to help Moses face the Pharaoh, and Moses eventually delivered God’s people out of slavery despite Moses’ lack of belief in himself and God’s plan.²⁰

Law students of faith, despite their insecurities and doubts, must understand that God has given them the talent and opportunity to make it to law school. By God’s grace, law students are worthy of the power that goes along with being a law student (and eventually a lawyer), which will allow them to help others in a significant and impactful way.

IMITATE THE BIRDS

Imposter syndrome creates worry, skepticism, and anxiety in law students.²¹ Even students who achieve high grades in one semester sometimes believe that it may have been a fluke, and if they do not achieve those same grades the next semester then others will know it was just luck or chance that allowed the students to succeed previously. Students, in general, may worry about law school exams. They may also worry about how they will perform or are performing in their legal internships, externships, or clerkships.

Law students of faith need not worry, just as the birds do not. “Look at the birds of the air; they sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?”²²

Worrying has never added another hour to a person’s life.²³ Instead of worrying, focus on how you can become the best law student and lawyer you can be. Approach work and studying with humility. Attack each task with a growth mindset, which means you are continually improving, learning, and growing. Ask questions and be open to taking constructive criticism. Moreover, appreciate the privilege and opportunity to be in law school where

17. Peter F. Lake, *When Fear Knocks: The Myths and Realities of Law School*, 29 STETSON L. REV. 1015, 1030 (2000).

18. *Exodus* 3:7-11 (New International Version).

19. *Exodus* 4:1-16 (New International Version).

20. *Exodus* 14 (New International Version).

21. *Imposter Syndrome? 8 Tactics to Combat the Anxiety*, *supra* note 1.

22. *Matthew* 6:26 (New International Version).

23. *Luke* 12:25 (New International Version).

you learn and develop skills that you can use to help transform someone else's life.

MAINTAIN A DISCERNING HEART

Imposter syndrome masks and contorts reality. For instance, imposter syndrome can make law students (and many people) confuse being inexperienced with being unqualified.²⁴ This is a key component of imposter syndrome that can cloud how law students view themselves, which can inhibit their development. Everyone who starts something new, such as law school or a legal job, is always inexperienced, but that certainly does not mean they are unqualified.

A person of faith should possess a discerning heart in which they seek wisdom to understand the difference between inexperience and unqualified. When law students make mistakes, they must discern why they made a mistake and determine how they can improve the next time. Honest self-awareness and accurate self-reflection involve successfully avoiding conflating inexperience with inability (or being unqualified), which will lead a law student to improve and grow.

Solomon, son of King David in the Bible, became king himself when he was young.²⁵ Before Solomon became king, David told the Israelites, "My son Solomon, the one whom God has chosen, is young and inexperienced. The task is great..."²⁶ Like any person new to a profession, he lacked the experience to rule the kingdom. What set him apart from other kings is that King Solomon, when asked by God for anything Solomon wanted, he asked for "wisdom and knowledge so that [he could] lead these people."²⁷ Solomon first sought wisdom and knowledge to do his best, and he knew he needed God's help to succeed.

If a student is completing a task they have never done or only done several times, such as drafting a complaint, motion, discovery, or a meet and confer letter, then undoubtedly mistakes will occur. Even lawyers practicing for years make mistakes. Lawyers assigning the work can make the situation worse when they act like the law student should know exactly what to do and how to do it. Regardless, errors are inevitable when people complete new tasks. The difference seen in a successful law student is that the student takes the time to reflect and identify their mistake(s) in order to move forward to do better next time. A law student of faith will seek wisdom to discern by self-assessing and self-reflecting, and the law student will recognize that they need God's help to succeed.

24. Lacy Rakestraw, *How to Stop Feeling Like a Phony in Your Library: Recognizing the Causes of the Imposter Syndrome, and How to Put a Stop to the Cycle*, 109 L. LIBR. J. 465, 473 (2017).

25. 1 *Chronicles* 29:1, 22 (New International Version).

26. 1 *Chronicles* 29:1 (New International Version).

27. 2 *Chronicles* 1:7, 10 (New International Version).

FAITH SHOULD KEEP YOU MOVING

Imposter syndrome can create such doubt and anxiety that it paralyzes a law student or lawyer.²⁸ The fear can impact a law student to the point where the student cannot move, but a person of faith can always push forward.

There are two people in the Bible who walked on water—Jesus and one of his disciples, Peter. When the disciples saw Jesus walking on the water, they thought it was a ghost and became afraid. Jesus told them, “Take courage! It is I. Don’t be afraid.”²⁹

Peter replied, “Lord, if it is you, tell me to come to you on the water.”

When Jesus said, “Come,” Peter stepped out of the boat and started walking on the water toward Jesus. “But when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink, cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’”

“Immediately Jesus reached out his hand and caught him. ‘You of little faith,’ he said, ‘why did you doubt?’”³⁰

Our faith can move mountains,³¹ so why should we doubt? When times get rough and the storms come, your faith can give you strength to keep moving. Whether it is a lower grade than you hoped for, a less-than-stellar evaluation from a supervisor, or not being selected for a job you interviewed for, your faith can help propel you to overcome any obstacles to reach the heights God has set for you.

CONCLUSION

Imposter syndrome can cause worry, doubt, and disbelief in law students and lawyers. People of faith can overcome this obstacle by living their faith. Knowing that you are chosen, believing that you are worthy, and imitating the birds by trusting in God all help law students create a strong foundation to succeed in law school and as lawyers. Fortify that foundation by maintaining a discerning heart and continually putting your faith into practice to make sure you keep moving forward. Remember, God has a plan for your life. We are not imposters; we were made in His image. God tells us, “Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”³²

28. *Imposter Syndrome? 8 Tactics to Combat the Anxiety*, *supra* note 1.

29. *Matthew* 14:26-27 (New International Version).

30. *Matthew* 14:28-31 (New International Version).

31. *Matthew* 17:20 (New International Version).

32. *Joshua* 1:9 (New International Version).