

Breaking the Rules

BY JENNY GRONINGER ROUGH



Jenny
Groninger
Rough

Conscientious. Duty-bound. A solid sense of right and wrong. Armed with those traits, I thought a legal career was an excellent pick for me. After all, it said right there in my Myers-Briggs personality profile that I believe in laws and traditions, and am uncomfortable breaking rules. I thought I'd make the perfect attorney.

I was wrong.

My tendency to see the world as black or white served me well in the classroom as I scribbled in my blue exam book the rules, the exception to the rule, and the exception to the exception. But when I began operating in the real world, my inability to see life as mostly gray hurt both me and my clients.

For example, in the midst of litigating a client's sexual-harassment suit, I was so hung up on sorting through the legal definition of a hostile work environment that I ignored the young woman sitting before me. She may well have needed a memo outlining her chances of success in mediation, but she also needed a sympathetic ear and an affirming voice to tell her that—legal or not—the way her boss had treated her was wrong.

During the years I worked for a large firm in downtown Los Angeles, where I was required to bill time in six-minute increments, I meticulously subtracted out bathroom breaks, coffee refills, and personal email correspondences. My rigid approach to life extended beyond the office too. When dropping off my dog at the kennel, I'd read through the release forms, crossing out

unfair clauses and making corrections that reflected what I was willing or unwilling to agree to. It was a painful existence.

But as I observed other attorneys—especially successful ones—I began to notice that they had the ability to see through the California civil codes, court precedent, and legal jargon to the heart of the matter—the *spirit* of the law. I soon began to feel like the Pharisees depicted in the New Testament, who prided themselves on following commandments to the tee, only to discover that when it came to spirituality, they were missing the boat. More importantly, I noticed that these attorneys were passionate about their work, and that their passion gave them confidence.

By then, I was already five years into my practice, and I was still waiting to feel the same excitement I saw in those other attorneys. I never did. Instead, I felt anxious—afraid I'd make a mistake that would cause a client to lose a case. As a result, I clutched onto the letter of the law even harder, ignoring my intuition, which would've helped guide me through some of the issues. The only days I half-enjoyed were days I put pen to paper. I've always liked writing, but crafting summary judgment motions, memoranda, and HIPPA procedures wasn't exactly the type of writing I craved to do. As an undergraduate, I had studied creative writing and wanted to pursue an advanced degree in that, but the prospect of living as a starving artist terrified me. So I chose the more well-traveled road—the one that led

to a step-by-step career track, complete with high compensation, stability, and the “right” kind of lifestyle. Thinking back, I realized the whole reason I went to law school in the first place was because I thought it was the path I was *supposed* to take.

Then, one day, my mom handed me a novel she had recently finished: *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan. I've always been a bookworm, but I stopped my frequent binges of pleasure reading in law school because of the sheer volume of textbook material I was required to cover. (Later, as an attorney, it was research material.) But turning those pages of Tan's book, I realized that the creative world of writing was where I really wanted to be. So I walked away from my legal career to write full time.

As with the law, though, writing skillfully also means being able to see in shades of gray—to wade through the facts to the heart of the story. And if I'm better at that now, I think it's largely because I'm pursuing a career that I genuinely love. That gives me the confidence to let go and fully trust my instincts.

I still like clear boundaries. But the beautiful part about the writing life is that unlike the law, it gives you explicit permission to break the rules: punctuation, structure, style, grammar—break 'em all! 📌

Jenny Groninger Rough graduated from Pepperdine University School of Law in 1999.