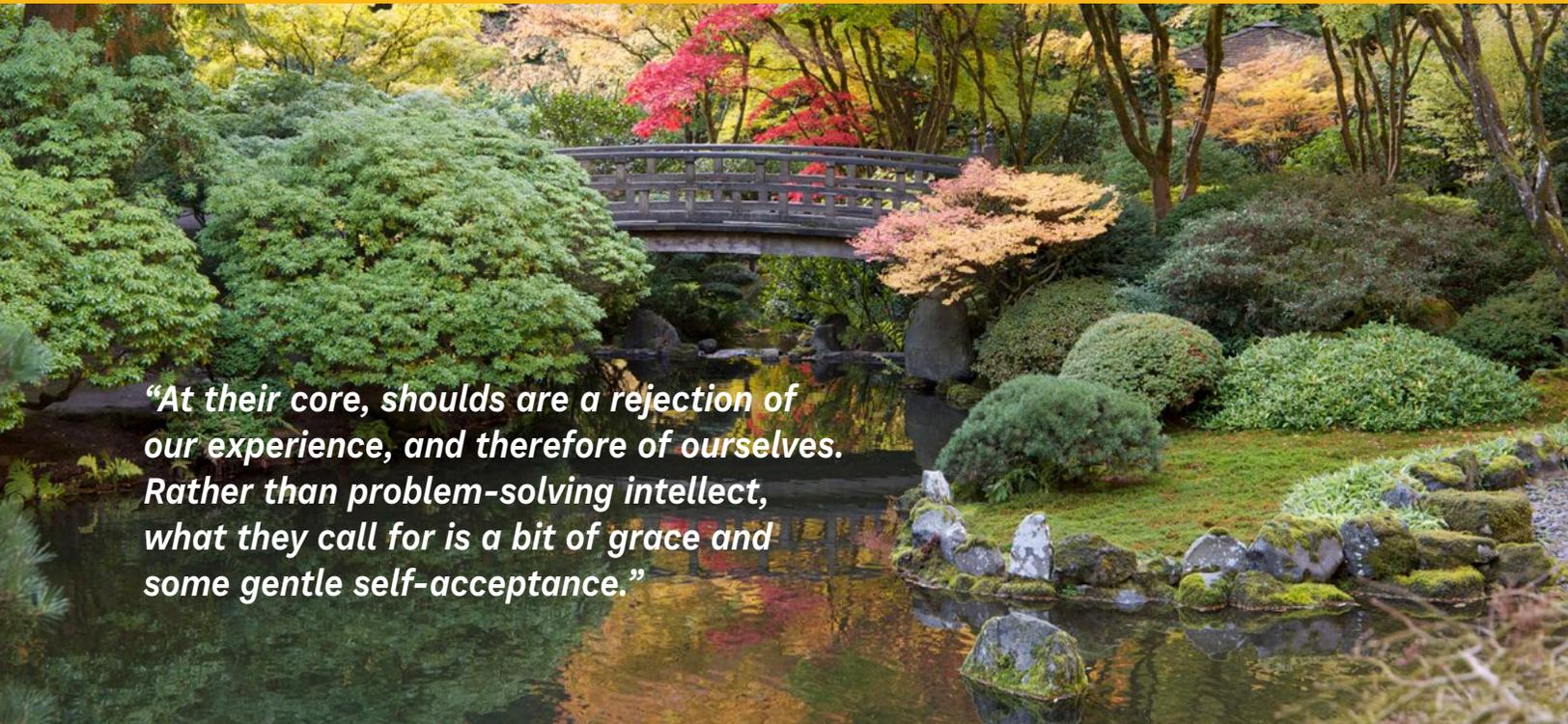




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“At their core, shoulds are a rejection of our experience, and therefore of ourselves. Rather than problem-solving intellect, what they call for is a bit of grace and some gentle self-acceptance.”

The Tyranny of Shoulds

By Bridget Donegan

As legal professionals, we pride ourselves on our high standards. We aim to be consistently knowledgeable, diligent, strategic, collegial, polished, efficient, and more. It is a lot to aspire to, and as a result, we can easily find ourselves preoccupied with the pressures of our work, worried about what we might be overlooking or where we may be falling short.

Very often, without noticing, those aspirations to excellence become internal mandates: “I should know all the relevant law about this issue,” “This brief should not take more than two hours,” or “I should anticipate all the other side’s positions.” We believe we ought to always be efficient, fully knowledgeable, and all-seeing. And our legal culture often makes us feel it would be dangerous for us and our clients if we questioned those mandates. We end up “shoulding all over ourselves,” with no end in sight.

Living under a regime of “shoulds” can be vicious. Reality refuses to play along, and we find ourselves consistently falling short. Seventy-five years ago, psychiatrist Karen Horney referred to this as “the tyranny of the shoulds.”¹ Her examples in 1950 remain salient for lawyers today: “You should be able to endure everything, to understand everything, to like everybody, to be always productive.” You should always be totally prepared, well-organized, and in control. You should know exactly what you are doing. As Horney observed, these unattainable dictates amount to “a blind issuing of orders which could lead only to self-deception or unfair self-criticism.” That is, either we deny to ourselves that we ever fall short or we castigate ourselves for each mistake, questioning our capacity or worthiness to practice law. Neither path helps us practice more skillfully and ethically, and both lead to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and chronic stress.

A tricky thing for legal professionals is that our fantastic analytical minds do not help us with the shoulds. We might see that it is patently unreasonable to expect to always perform flawlessly, but the dictates remain. In fact, they often grow stronger from our intellectual grasp of their irrationality. Now we not only beat ourselves up for making a mistake, but we find further fault in our persistent habit of self-castigation—because we “know” we “should not be so hard on ourselves.” Intellectually, we know that perfection is an unfair standard, but in navigating our daily lives, we have a hard time believing that is true. The shoulds do not arise from rational thinking, and rational thinking will not help them go away.

At their core, shoulds are a rejection of our experience, and therefore of ourselves. Rather than problem-solving intellect, what they call for is a bit of grace and some gentle self-acceptance.

When we’re so accustomed to relying on analytical thought, a suggestion like “offer yourself compassion” or “welcome your feelings” can sound trite, insubstantial, or even untrustworthy. But setting aside rational analysis does not mean engaging in irrational analysis. Instead, this is an invitation to

pause for a moment and consciously allow—without judgment—the reality of your current experience. That might mean, for example, allowing it to be true that you feel embarrassed and worried about the way you answered someone’s question. You do not need to come to any conclusions, figure anything out, or fix anything. Right now, you are simply allowing your experience to be what it is. You might find that when you stop wrestling with your distress, it dissipates.

Whether we find relief or not, that moment of honesty gives us the freedom to choose a realistic, authentic path forward. We can begin to take responsibility for ourselves in a manner that trying to adhere to a set of unattainable mandates will never allow. Punishing ourselves for every mistake does not stop us from erring. It undermines confidence, makes us afraid of our next step, saps our creativity, and discourages us from clear-eyed efforts to ask for help and to learn.

It is natural and inevitable for every lawyer to fall short of aspirations and to make mistakes. Only when we give ourselves permission to admit that “every lawyer” includes ourselves can we be realistic about where we are and where we are going. Experimenting with self-acceptance can help us maintain our integrity as we move forward, and worlds of possibility open up when we get out of our own way. In the words of author Tara Brach, “The boundary to what we can accept is the boundary to our freedom.”² ●

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1. Horney, Karen (1950), *Neurosis and Human Growth: The Struggle Toward Self-Realization*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. (1991 ed.).

2. Brach, Tara (2003), *Radical Acceptance: Embracing Your Life with the Heart of a Buddha*. New York; Toronto, Brantam Dell.