

Get serious about your career

USE THE FACT YOU'RE NEW TO THE PROFESSION TO QUESTION AND INFLUENCE THE TRADITIONAL PRACTICE OF LAW.



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I have a problem. Ever since I saw designer Paula Scher on ted.com I've been dividing the world into the serious and the solemn. The National Gallery of Victoria? Solemn. Museum of Old and New Art? Serious. This categorising, I now realise, is very solemn. But I'm not embarrassed or ashamed; most things we do are solemn – socially correct, appropriate, common, popular, expected. Seriousness involves innovation, rebellion and imperfection. As a consequence, it can be uncomfortable and challenging. Yet it can also be a catalyst for progress and improvement and therefore of great benefit, especially to young lawyers.

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Paula Scher wasn't the first to highlight a distinction between being serious and being solemn. American columnist and humorist Russell Baker in 1978 wrote an article in the *New York Times* magazine titled "Why Being Serious is Hard". Concerned the "vital distinction" between seriousness and solemnity was being forgotten, he set out a list of examples to remind his readers of the difference. To him, jogging, *Playboy*, the Roman Empire, arguing about structured programs and attending conferences on the future of anything are solemn. New York, Shakespeare, Humphrey Bogart movies about private eyes and "[t]aking a long walk

by yourself during which you devise a foolproof scheme for robbing Cartiers" are serious.

Because the truly serious is rare, it is also unfamiliar. As a consequence, people typically prefer the solemn. Yet Ms Scher – a highly acclaimed designer (think the Citibank logo and the New York City Ballet's promotional material) – is most proud of her serious work, such as designing bold, intricate record covers and eye-popping signage for museums and dance studios; work that redefined the public's understanding of design. For her, it was being serious that enabled her to reshape, improve and change the way things were expected to be, and generate her most remarkable and rewarding work. This is as relevant to lawyers as it is to designers.

If you think about it, much of what we do as lawyers is solemn, not serious. Charging by the hour is solemn. Specialising in a narrow area of law is solemn. Striving for work-life balance is solemn. Arbitration probably started out being serious, but now it's solemn. Equally, writing in plain English. This is because following a serious idea through until it becomes mainstream makes it solemn. It doesn't mean it's any less worthwhile. Much of what is important, effective and respected is solemn. It just means that it's no longer examining, challenging or redefining the conventional landscape.

In a profession based on precedent and tradition, a bit of serious thinking is

exactly what the law requires. People willing to question the status quo, require the justification of settled practices and risk testing new approaches will advance the legal

profession and their own legal careers. Are we resolving each client's problems the best way we can? Are there alternative ways for us to shape our careers and organise our work? Do we do what we do (managing matters, drafting documents, advising clients) the most useful/interesting/fitting way, or the way things have always been done?

These questions are not new and the answers are not clear; being serious is hard. But particular conditions make it easier. To Scher, these include passion and youth, and being unqualified for a job. Not knowing any better, breaking rules you don't realise exist, and seeing processes with fresh eyes is exactly what sparks novel, unconventional, serious thought. This means that young lawyers are in the perfect position to inject some seriousness into the law, to redefine best practice, and to improve the look and feel of legal careers. This lofty statement, again, is very solemn. You may roll your eyes, but I'm going to leave it there anyway – now that's getting serious. •

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