



## **Practicing Internal Boundaries**

To be fair, it wasn't good news.

But the partner was practically hyperventilating. By his account, the news that we'd just received would destroy our client's case, embarrass us in front of a federal judge, imperil our relationship with the client, and pitch the firm into financial freefall. In short, it was, through no fault of our own: The. End. Of. The. World.

I murmured consoling words. I made a few suggestions about ways to address, or at least mitigate, the situation. But when it became clear that the keening was destined to continue, I excused myself and went back to my own office, where I quietly—and quite contentedly—got back to my own work. It's not that I didn't care about the "crisis." It's not that I wasn't fully engaged in finding a solution. It's just that at long last I have finally learned that responding in kind to another person's overreaction, temper tantrum, anxiety attack, or catastrophizing is:

- a) A waste of time
- b) Unproductive
- c) A threat to my serenity
- d) A danger to my recovery

Early on in my career, and certainly before I entered recovery, I could not have exited that office, or that conversation (to the extent someone else's uncontrolled ranting allows conversation.) Instead, I would have stayed. I would have engaged with the partner's anxiety. I would have been tied up in knots by it, in fact.

In the end I would have adopted the senior partner's anxiety as my very own, careening mentally through the rest of the workday—and looking for release from it at the bottom of a bottle when I got home.

You've heard about resentment being poison you drink to kill someone else? This was similar: I would try to self-medicate away someone else's crazy.

Given that I had enough of my own crazy to work on, this was not sustainable.

One of the many brilliant but simple lessons I have learned in recovery is that the way someone else behaves is completely outside my realm of control. All I can control is my reaction.

For example: Opposing counsel is deliberately nasty by text, email, and voicemail. At first I fire back, but it only revs his engine. He is provocative in this way for a reason. So I detach. I do not respond in kind. And I discover that the more pleasant and polite I am, the more frustrated he becomes. Depriving the flame of its oxygen works.

And I stay sober.

A client decides that the way to respond to an opposing party taking video of her is to flip them off on camera. I advise that this is NOT a good look; please, I tell her, no further responses. She

doubles down with a text to the other side that would make a sailor blush. Irritation rises... Then I realize my client is going to do what she's going to do. I try to see the humor in the situation. Where's Candid Camera when you need it?

And I stay sober.

Sometimes, of course, it is impossible at work, as in our private lives, to let everything just roll off our backs. A boss responds with fury over minor edits. A colleague mocks co-counsel for getting emotional. A client is abusive to the receptionist over the phone. (Unacceptable.)

Sometimes we get triggered. Sometimes (back to charming opposing counsel) someone tries to trigger us.

In those moments when I feel myself ramping up, my stomach turning and my chest tightening, I try to create some mental distance from the situation.

I do a quick inventory. What's going on? What part of me is being threatened? (Too often - ding, ding, ding - it's my ego.)

Also, critically: What is my part? What was my role in creating the situation? Is there anything I did or didn't do that made matters worse?

Once I am able to assess my own behavior—which is the only part of a situation I can reliably control—I am able to look with a little more clarity at what else is going on. First, I can try to correct my own missteps. I can apologize. I can try to get my attitude in check.

I can also remember that everyone comes to every moment with a lifetime of struggles—recognized or unrecognized, it doesn't matter. Everyone has their monsters—or crazy—to grapple with. Everyone has a plain ol' bad day.

Opposing counsel may be struggling with his own addiction. The client may have anger issues, or early onset dementia. The judge on her lofty perch may fear getting older, or be caring for an ailing wife. The list of possibilities is endless. I don't need to know what the thing is that is causing the out-of-proportion reaction. This doesn't mean I immediately become a powerless doormat because someone else is freaking out. I still can speak my truth. I just try to do it calmly, with purpose. I need to be able, in the moment of the "crisis," to stake out that mental distance that allows me to see that, whatever the cause, the crazy is almost always not about me. I can be gracious and kind to the person wiggling out, which benefits the other person and also protects my sobriety, and my sanity.

So when the boss is losing it, I listen, I offer to help, I strategize. At the same time, I try to stake out mental distance to see that the work itself is one thing, while his reaction is really just about him. After all, snafus are inevitable; his reaction is not. I try to remind myself that this is his reaction, or overreaction, not mine.

He may be able to rant now and throw back a few whiskeys later. He can self-medicate his own crazy. I don't have the luxury of self-medication. I can't drink away my own problems, much less his. So when the atmosphere starts to feel toxic, I step away mentally, or physically if required.

Happily, the longer I'm in recovery, the more I find that even the smallest change in geography—office to office—is unnecessary. I've learned that the most important space is not so much between our office doors as it is between my ears.

I don't wish crazy on anybody. But I'm done—I hope—trying to self-medicate away someone else's crazy in me.