

# Beyond the Brief: Cultivating Identity Outside of the Law

*When the only version of ourselves is who we are at work, it begs the question, what else is there, and how does this narrow view of our identity affect us?*



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A common question that we in the legal profession are faced with is, 'what do you do?'. But why is the answer so often and so plainly, 'I am a lawyer?'. It is a phrase loaded with effort, pride, and often, exhaustion. It is a title we have all worked so hard to claim. The process of becoming a member of the legal profession is highly demanding and can easily become the centre of our identity, leaving little room for the rest of our unique personalities to exist.

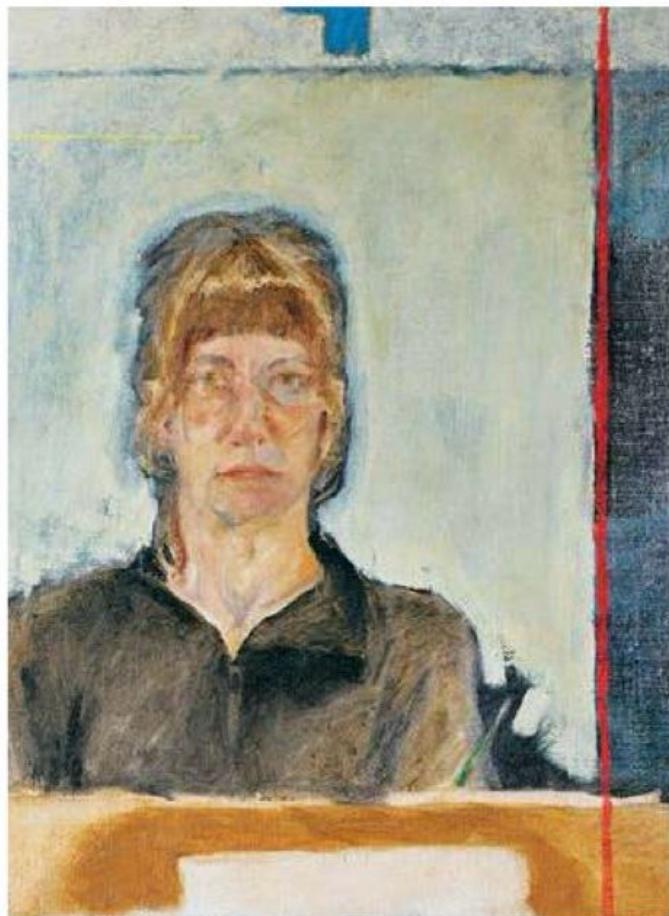
What happens when we want to be more than a lawyer, what happens when the job doesn't fulfill every part of us?

The legal profession often glorifies long hours, perfectionism, and emotional detachment. Whilst these traits may serve us professionally, they can also quietly strip away other parts of our identity. Our hobbies, culture, relationships and even just resting can be pushed aside in service of being the best legal representative we can be.

## How we become the job

From high school to law school and practical legal training, we spend years focussing on our goal to be a lawyer. From day one, we are taught to be analytical, use critical thinking skills, and to prioritise our study above all else. It has become so easy for us to forget that we are more than just the output that we provide.

Early into the profession we also feel pressure to prove ourselves; to be the last to leave the office, the most reliable and dedicated. It becomes easy for us to believe that being 'all in' is the only pathway to a successful legal career. Society enables the loss of identity to become a reality. We, as lawyers, are viewed as a hardworking profession that is filled with long hours. When our identity becomes inseparable from our employment, the idea of pursuing something else can feel as if it is a form of betrayal. It can almost feel as if there is no room for us to embrace other parts of our identity, other than being a lawyer.



Zuza Zuchowski



Susan O'Doherty



Lori Pensini

### **The cost of over-identifying with the job**

The costs of over-identifying with our role is prevalent in the form of burnout, stress, loneliness, or disconnection. The legal profession has long struggled with wellbeing. In its 2019 Lawyer Wellbeing Report, the Victorian Legal Services Board and Commissioner found that psychological distress and depression levels in lawyers are significantly higher than population norms. Similarly, the International Bar Association reported that one in three barristers believed their work had a negative or extremely negative impact on their wellbeing.

Poor wellbeing in the law presents in many ways - those mentioned above as well as anxiety, insomnia, physical health issues, substance abuse and low levels of autonomy. The contributing factors that lead lawyers to get to a point of such poor wellbeing can include the relentless workload, a culture of perfectionism, billing pressure and a lack of psychological safety. We sometimes hear that lawyers should be able to handle these things, and that stress is simply part of the career.

When we are drowning in pressure in a role with high stakes, there is a tendency to forget work life balance and lose our sense of self. Our relationships with our friends, family and our passions can become a distant memory.

We need to remember that we are more than just our email signature and the suit we wear.

### **Find what fills your cup**

Reclaiming our identity outside of the law is a necessity that allows us to return to our work more grounded, more human and whole.

We can rediscover joy by taking control of our lives outside of the profession and recalling who we truly are. This can be done through a creative outlet - like writing, painting, baking or dancing. Others may value movement and exercise such as running, yoga or a social sport. For many, cultural and spiritual identity provides grounding through language, ritual, food, and family.

These passions aren't extracurricular, they are essential. They remind us that we are more important than our inbox, and they help us clear our mind. They help us process emotion, connect with others, and return to our work more energised and whole.



### Finding balance with Tahlia Ferrari

As a Barrister practicing predominantly in family law, Tahlia Ferrari is committed to guiding families through the legal system with empathy and clarity. She provides skilled and compassionate advocacy in complex parenting and property matters, helping clients find practical, tailored solutions. Tahlia was recognised in the Lawyers Weekly, Women in Law Awards in 2023 and 2024 and in the Australian Law Awards in 2024 and 2025, as a finalist for the award of Barrister of The Year.

Tahlia acknowledges that there have been times when her identity was consumed by work. Early in her career, she approached burnout, a moment that required her to step back and seek support. Accessing therapy, including sessions offered through the Victorian Bar, helped Tahlia recognise the importance of protecting her wellbeing and building an identity beyond the law.

'If you don't have your health, you don't have anything,' she reflects. For Tahlia, balance is not accidental but intentional. She makes space for yoga, running, meditation, and time with her family and close friends. These practices, alongside firm boundaries, remind her that while she can advocate for her clients, she is not responsible for the choices that brought them to her.

Tahlia has seen first-hand how the profession can glorify self-sacrifice, particularly in environments where working the longest hours is treated as a badge of honour. By challenging that culture, she has been able to fully embrace her roles outside the law; a mother of two, a wife and a friend. Rather than detracting from her practice, Tahlia believes these identities make her a stronger, more empathetic advocate, 'Experiencing life outside of the courtroom makes me more well-rounded and helps me connect with people from all walks of life.'

Tahlia's message to younger lawyers is clear: you are so much more than your job.

*'Protect your interests outside of the law and invest in friendships beyond the profession. When you're sick or struggling, it's your family and friends who give you the support you need' she says. Taking time for yourself is not an indulgence, it's essential: 'You'll be the best version of yourself if you take time out to sharpen the pencil.' Looking back, she adds one reminder she wishes she had known sooner: 'Be kinder and gentler on yourself — this career is not a sprint, it's a marathon.'*

### Don't lose yourself

Law is what we do, but it isn't all we are.

If it feels as if you have lost parts of your identity along your career path, consider this your invitation to return. Return to the book you never finished. The friendship you want to rebuild. The part of you that once danced, wrote, explored and rested. That part of you still matters.

When we take our identity seriously, beyond the brief, we embrace and thrive not in only our work, but our lives.