



Do I have permission to grieve? The billable target pandemic.

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In honour of my grandfather, Bakhshish Singh Hayre. He taught me to always be principled.

Preamble:

Nothing is a coincidence. I was reading, *Indian in the Cabinet* by JWR, and thinking to myself — “I want to publish another article”.



would like to state that this article is not targeted at any specific firm, but rather a mindset and lifestyle that many of us inherit in the professional world. Unfortunately, it just so happens that this experience occurred during a certain time + place. I have much respect for where I have been. I am grateful for those I worked with during then.

I will never forget when one of the partners called a client to inform them of my personal circumstance, in the hopes that he would not bother me (rare - but powerful).

*(Background for those unaware: **a billable target** is a number of hours that many lawyers (and some other professionals, like accountants), have to “clock” in order to make up for their salary. This means time actually working for a client matter - not time in the office. They are two different things. “**Missing target**” is perceived as one of the worst things you can do as an associate. Unlike other jobs, those on a billable target are not usually given sick days or bereavement. Any time missed, is usually time you have to make up whenever you choose. It gives you a lot more flexibility, but there is often no such thing as a “free” day off etc...).*

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September 23rd, 2021 marks the one-year of my grandfather’s passing. Not only was he someone very proud of me, he got to witness me graduate four times - and supported me in various ways throughout the years. The week he passed, I was lucky enough to FaceTime him while he was in the hospital — shortly after I Whatsapp'd him (tech-savvy)



years to his inevitable call to the other side.

His passing came as a surprise to me. He had been ill in the hospital for over one-month, and due to his dialysis treatment, he was safer there than outside because of COVID. Given the precautions at that time, we were not allowed to visit him. Now looking through my phone, I believe that the last time I saw him was on June 26, 2020 (my grandparents' 65th anniversary). For some that is not long - for us, it was. Mind you, I had lived in Australia for years, and though longer periods of time in between visits was inevitable - my introverted self started to appreciate the visits more as I saw his body change.

In a way, this is an homage to him. A short passage to appreciate the opportunity he birthed when he came to Canada in 1970 - followed shortly my father and paternal family in '72.

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Reversing back to what sparked this article;

Though I am a 4th year call, I feel my eyes have been opened to a lot of inequities in the legal community, and system. Some - subjective to the place; and others, due to who you work around.

Like I said - the passing was a shock. I took the day off of work and scrambled in downtown to find my stuff to be with my family in Surrey. Sitting at the dining room table at my grandparents' townhouse was where I asked myself: **“Do I have permission to grieve?”**

Some may say “of course”, and others will understand *why* I asked that. Disheartening as it may seem, that was one of the first thoughts



immediately started adding and subtracting hours to see how many days would be acceptable / how many longer days that I would have if I took time to take care of myself.

I found myself staring at my double-screen crying as I ate baby carrots and celery. Asking: "wtf are you here?" - the day after his death. I slowly packed up, and left to be with my family. To be frank, that same partner asked me this question too as I had one day until a limitation deadline to file a subrogation NOCC. *"It's more work for me to tell someone what the file is about, compared to finishing it myself"*, I told another one. We know that's true.

This was mixed in with another family crisis, and some personal things in a matter of 72 hours. I quite literally remember talking to my friend thinking that I might die because I could not breathe. The fact that on top of this, my mind was so consumed with billables, was loosely what we litigators would call, **"double costs"**. Being punished for something twice due to your own failure to resolve a matter.

No matter where I turned for answers - I was met with something different. The options ranged from:

- *Don't worry about it.*
- *You'll have to make them up.*
- *Talk to HR.*
- *I have never been asked that question.*



All in all, you can assume the mental stress this caused. Fast forward two more months, and the world's largest protest started in India. Being a woman of immense privilege with a legal background, I took the onus to reactivate my Instagram advocacy blog of now 13,000 to educate the public on how our families and diaspora are being side-swept by the hands of a Hindutva nationalist Prime Minister in India.

I do not regret that standing up for my people also had me double-guessing my billable. I would not have been given that platform without my grandfather.

(Some articles for context: <https://jillianharris.com/the-farmers-in-india-protest-here-are-a-few-important-things-you-should-know/> ; <https://www.cbabc.org/BarTalk/Articles/2021/April/Features/The-Impact-of-the-Indian-Farmers%E2%80%99-Movement-on-Cana>).

Though I made target - it was only because I worked daily from 7am-5pm (for some that's normal - I don't think that should be). I just had to keep questioning my sanity in doing that.

All of the time I spent chairing a committee, and sitting on several boards was not going towards my, "non-billables" because it was not inner-firm related. *Not that I did it for that reason.* Simply, my legal community work was not being factored into my work as an associate as it is at some other firms. The time I was spending on that work was draining me - even though it was supposed to be fulfilling. *I have resigned many to focus on my blog.*

Healing. Processing intergenerational trauma. New files every day. It was a lot.



- Will I lose my job if I'm a little under target?
- Calculated my billables every day, and sometimes multiple times a day to make sure I wasn't behind.
- Had perpetual anxiety because we had monthly associate check-in meetings. I knew I would be respectfully "called out" for being under target (*they only saw where you were at, not the time frame where you "lacked"*).
- How do I explain the impact of the farmers' protest on me/my advocacy to white people?
- Maybe you should work some weekends to be safe (*I created that boundary for the most part when I got called to the bar*).
- Cried. A lot.
- Had a mental daily countdown until Christmas break (*I factored this into my extra hours*).

What I did to mitigate the above, is something that I thought I'd never do - started **working for myself**.

It sounds glamorous, but I have to coach my mind to practice ease over anxiety when I see that "being my own boss" means that I can take whatever time I need for myself, and more often than not, bill 75% less and bring in what I made at big firms because I am compensated fairly (sorry).



know that I preach about work-life balance and educate on imposter syndrome. These are things that I had to train myself to implement and understand too — it is a daily practice.

(Previous article I wrote: <https://lifeinlaw.ca/blog/the-reality-of-imposter-syndrome/>)

Even if leaving “big law” means I am less stressed, I would be lying if I said that I don’t question whether I am an adequate lawyer for eliminating a 1650 billable year. It is so engrained in our minds, and starts in law schools where students are not taught that they have the option to go to smaller firms / practice part-time.

In many ways, the profession has become a rat race.

My purpose in writing this is to give perspective into the mind of many lawyers -- not just associates. The impact that this plays on mental health is huge. **I hope that you know you are not alone in this. I can only achieve for the community what is achievable by us all.**

/RKH

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