

# Answering the Call

by [Kelly J. Beard](#) | Nov 20, 2017



I marked my 60th birthday by officially closing my law practice. I'd practiced employment discrimination law for nearly 25 years in a variety of iterations – from small boutique firms to large silk-stocking firms. The last ten years I practiced solo, conceding the fact that I don't work well with others. Especially other lawyers. The entire time I practiced law, I longed to quit. Even in law school I second-guessed my decision, nearly quitting more than once. I wasn't cut out to be a lawyer. With notable exceptions, lawyers aren't people I admire. Some lawyers – thank God – do remarkable work; these are the ones suing polluters, appealing death sentences, and righting wrongs. But most lawyers aren't doing that. Increasingly, during the years I practiced, the lawyers I knew (and especially the ones I worked against) seemed interested in two things: money and power. The only lawyers I'd seen growing up were in books or on TV. It never occurred to me Atticus Finch and Perry Mason were lovely fictions. Nothing prepared me for the real lawyers, the ones with a smug sense of entitlement, an ugly mean streak, and a flair for bullying. For me, practicing law was a painful poison.

Over the past several years I'd let my practice ebb while I returned to college for my Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing. Although I kept practicing part-time during the program, I imagined closing my practice when

I graduated in July of 2016. I couldn't. The truth is, the same fear that kept me practicing law before earning my MFA, kept me practicing law afterwards.

I read once that the ways in which people view their financial circumstances is determined largely by how they grew up. People who grew up with wealth and privilege, tend to see themselves as having wealth even when they don't; people who grew up like I did, in lower working-class families where resources are scarce or nonexistent, tend to see themselves as being poor even when they aren't. That's me. I'm not rich. But I'm not poor. I'm pretty solidly middle-class, and have been most of my working (lawyer) life. I bought the red boots I liked last week, I just traveled to Mexico with two writer friends for my birthday, and I'm saving money to go on a book tour when my memoir comes out next fall. But I have never once gotten through an entire day without worrying about money.

At 60, I finally had enough emotional maturity and ego strength to bear these truths: I will never feel financially secure, even if I spend the next ten years practicing law instead of following my heart into writing; if I am blessed or lucky enough to have ten good years ahead of me, I want to spend them in a way that allows me, at the end, to let go of this life with as much grace and gratitude as possible. That means being a loving and available presence in the lives of my daughter and grandbaby; it means writing; it means taking time for friends, yoga, piano. It means praying and meditating. It means doing something in the world that will continue to bless it after I'm gone. I closed my practice with a prayer of gratitude. Ten days later, I learned my manuscript had been chosen for the Zone 3 Press 2017 Creative Nonfiction Book Award.

It wasn't magic. I've been working on the manuscript for nearly seven years. I'd received a dozen or more rejections. But I believe this open door would have stayed shut as long as I seemed to insist on some promise of what is on the other side of the door before turning the knob. In truth, I don't believe I would have received the Book Award or the news of publication if I hadn't been able or willing to close my practice first. The inner calling required an answer and a step (or leap) of faith.

Jungian psychologist James Hollis writes, “[I]t is up to us at this later point, when we have served those voices so long, to realize that our own psyches have a unique point of view, that each of us is different, and are bound for separate journeys, and all of us, at the end of our life, will have to answer as to what we did with our summons.” So here I am. At 60. Ready to answer the call, no longer waiting for a sense of security or promises, and with no idea how this story will end.