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"Commentary: Being Uncomfortable, Milking Goats and Making Partner"

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Every once in a while I have an "aha" moment. I had one in late October at our firm's executive women's retreat.

The retreat gives our women lawyers and clients a chance to get to know each other better while hearing from some provocative speakers, indulging in some spa pampering and taking in some new adventures (goat milking was one of the more bizarre ones).

During the retreat, we had a panel discussion featuring three high-profile women talking about how women can make their mark, whether that's professionally, in their community or on the world as a whole.

One woman commented that pushing boundaries is key. She told us to get comfortable with being uncomfortable and that being comfortable means being in a rut.

Her comment struck me like a bolt of lightning. In two sentences, she captured all the advice I've been giving young lawyers, particularly those looking to make partner.

A lot of anxiety is percolating in our economy, needless to say, and young lawyers are nervous about more than just whether they'll make partner; many are worried about keeping their jobs at all.

I know that terror firsthand. When I graduated from law school in 1985, the real estate market was tanking. That left me, a young real estate lawyer, wondering for what I had just spent the past three years of my life preparing.

Looking back, trying to survive in a market that wanted nothing more than to spit me out was the best learning experience I could have had. There were very few giant deals needing lots of bodies to paper. I worked on alternative financing mechanisms, loan workouts and other special servicing vehicles (including one of the first and largest foreclosures of a prominent building and developer in downtown Dallas, if you'll allow me to toot my own horn). I did anything and everything, including spending time in bankruptcy court, which is no real estate lawyer's idea of a good time.

In short, I found ways to survive as a real estate lawyer in one of the worst real estate markets ever. It was exhausting and stressful, and I remember lamenting to a colleague that I would kill just to be able to do the same transaction twice. But it made me a better lawyer.

I knew I was ready to make partner the day the partner I was working for came to my office and I didn't panic. That was a great feeling.

It was the same feeling I detected from many women who attended the retreat in October. Even the act of attending was nerve-racking for some women. They didn't know what to wear, they weren't going to know many people and it was all just plain foreign.

The activities ranged from cooking classes to long-distance bike rides. One of the recurrent themes, though, was that the women had to overcome their initial reluctance to try something new, like riding on a Segway and milking a goat during a farm tour.

As one of my colleagues said after her goat-milking experience, "I'm not going to say I enjoyed it, but it wasn't as weird as I thought it would be. And now I can say I milked a goat!"

That's a good lesson for all of us.

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In my experience as a supervising attorney, I have found that those young lawyers who are the most uncomfortable in their early years make the most extraordinary lawyers. They're forced to be creative, persistent and resourceful.

When the economy is booming and work is flying at you, a lawyer doesn't need to be very creative to make money. As fun as great economies can be, they don't necessarily forge the best lawyers.

Young lawyers anxious about their futures can put that anxiety to good use. They will have a difficult few years, but the discomfort they feel is called growth and learning. And it will serve them well for the rest of their lives, whether or not they make partner.

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