**Wellness for Law**

**Building Professional Resilience**

It is an enormous privilege to be speaking at this conference upon a subject which I, and many in my Chambers, feel so strongly supportive of. We are so happy to see how seriously the Bar Council are taking this initiative and this conference is truly testament to the growing relevance and importance of well-being and mindfulness at the Bar.

Our chambers, I am proud to say, has taken steps to incorporate many of the benefits and values from an early stage. The Chambers’ group was conceived in March 2017.

I would like to pay tribute and owe a huge debt of gratitude to Christabel McCooey who has helped me and us in so many ways and given so much of her time and energy to this project in such a calm and constructive manner. Without her, I am sure we would not have got off the ground. I also would like to extend a big thank you to Sanaz Saifolahi who has given great encouragement and has made such useful suggestions as to who to invite as speakers, and to those other people in chambers who have contributed and helped us to achieve what we have so far.

It began as a ‘Spirituality and Reflection’ Group exploring what sustains people; sharing acquired wisdom and what it means to build a positive, supportive atmosphere in chambers. The invitation was to all members, pupils and staff although it has in fact so far been taken up mainly by members of Chambers. That may have something to do with the time of sessions, though probably more reflects the perceived vulnerabilities of pupils and staff. It began without a full plan in mind; we took the first step then the next presented itself. The start was small.

The contents of the group activities have been varied and have comprised, among other things:

Group-led discussions and reflections about life at the Bar/maintaining equilibrium (shared book extracts, quotes, personal outlooks, self-reflection exercises);

A 12-week Mindfulness course ran by an ex-prosecution barrister;

A mental health awareness evening (run by the Grespi Foundation, which includes a highly-experienced psychiatrist and psychotherapist);

A hypnotherapy/stress reduction taster session;

Two different (and hugely enjoyable) Art therapy classes delivered by trained psychotherapists and an illustrator respectively;

A weekly in-house Pilates session by a trained teacher which is ongoing and takes place in the main chambers conference room, after some table-shifting by the junior clerks!

Upcoming activities include:

A drama workshop;

A life coach which may become a course;

A creative writing course by a playwright and writer which again might become a course.

We are also actively thinking about other types of activity for example theatre which touches upon themes of well-being, introspection and spirituality.

In summarising what I believe is our overall vision, I think that the law, and specifically the Bar has the capacity to become all-consuming: by its nature it involves dealing with peoples’ crises in various forms each day. Most people never want to be touched by the law and it is a last resort when they feel compelled to. In order to provided dispassionate advice, we are encouraged to crush, deny or block any emotion we have in respect of a case and thereby remain completely detached.

In reality, is that possible? In truth, on some level, we experience the natural stresses of a difficult case, whether from the facts and re-told experiences of clients, and/or the court demands, tight deadlines and long hours, difficult opponents, etc. Recent cases which left a profound effect include the playing of a ‘999’ tape in court by a neighbour unsuccessfully attempting to save the victim who was butchered in her home and garden by my client, and seeing, as prosecution counsel, the profound effects upon the young Italian victim of multiple rapes in a sex trafficking case. She had been required to come back to the UK many years after the harrowing events to give evidence and be challenged at length about the tiniest detail in two separate trials.

Where do we put that absorption of stress and often emotional outpouring of others within the justice system? Where is our humanity? Often, though we may try to deny or not want to see it, it may be off-loaded into heavy drinking, smoking, drugs, gambling, depression and/or various forms of dysfunctionality in our personal lives.

The challenge seems to be in maintaining, and somehow nurturing, the ability to experience the richness of life in ‘the thick of it’; to be present for simple pleasures and enjoyments that are beyond law, and which the law might easily blind us to, through the level of attention it often demands.

To give out, one must receive spiritual and emotional sustenance, and the Well-being at the Bar movement signifies the growing acknowledgment of this.

Well-being initiatives help to dispel common myths, whether spoken or unspoken: ‘you cannot ever show vulnerability or weakness’; ‘you cannot ever be a “kind” barrister, as that somehow means “soft”’; ‘you must take yourself seriously at all times’.

Further, they help to move us from the rigidly logical and rational arena, with which our legal brains are so adept and comfortable, into a space where we begin to sense our greatest experience exists beyond the temporal, fleeting circumstances of each day’s case, allowing us to tap into the continuing and unchanging reality of who we are at core.

Inner peace and resilience are found in mysterious places and the Well-being initiatives, in whatever shape or form, seems to be giving a vocabulary to that growing inquiry.

The advantages we see from taking well-being seriously are in my view huge and vital and I hope very much that it is a movement which will continue to grow and have greater resonance in all our lives. Ironically too, given that it takes time out of our professional lives, the time we devote to this will mean we are healthier and better able to deal with our work and the inevitable stresses and pressure of our lives within and outside the Law. My strong hope is that what is still seen by some as ‘fringe’ and ‘alternative’ will shortly be mainstream in all chambers.

**Anthony Metzer QC**

**Goldsmith Chambers**