

Ep #79: Make Space Before September: A Call for Rest and Intention



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John E. Grant

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For most of you, as you listen to this episode, it is the middle of summer. And my point for today is to really encourage you to have a summer. Not just sneak in a break here and there, but really embrace the season. To step back, disconnect, reconnect, get some honest perspective about your life and your practice and how those two things truly intersect.

Because the noise is coming, right? September is going to be full of should-dos and hustle and pressure to chase various ideas of success. And hopefully, those will be your own ideas, but we all know that there will be lots of people and companies trying to sell you on their version of what they think success should mean for you.

And my hope is that you'll use the suggestions of this episode to get quiet, to get clear, to be intentional so that you can protect the things that really matter to you.

You're listening to the *Agile Attorney Podcast*, powered by Agile Attorney Consulting. I'm John Grant and it is my mission to help legal professionals of all kinds build practices that are profitable, sustainable, and scalable for themselves and the communities they serve. Ready to become a more Agile Attorney? Let's go.

Hey, everyone. Welcome back. So, as this episode releases, it is the middle of summer in the Northern Hemisphere. And it is a - hopefully a fun time for you, but it can be a challenging time. I know a lot of folks feel a lot of different types of pressure in the summer. There's family stuff, there's vacation, and then we've got our business, we've got things that we're trying to pay attention to, and my key message for this episode, and I'm going to try to keep it to sort of a brief one this time, is to really use the summer, embrace it, have a summer.

It's been a while since I've mentioned it, but I am a huge fan of the Cal Newport book, which is *Slow Productivity*. A lot of Cal Newport books, but

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his most recent one, *Slow Productivity*, and one of the core messages from that book is to embrace seasonality. You can't just be on the same treadmill doing the same things day in and day out and weekend and wake out, right? It's a recipe for burnout. And so I'm hoping that you will be able to use this summer season to really get that relaxation, get that reset, get that perspective that this season is geared to provide.

And for some of you, that's going to be gearing up for what's probably going to be a busy fall season. I know for me, I'm getting ready to send my oldest child off to college, and he's going kind of far. I live in the Pacific Northwest. He's going to college in New England. It's something that I did to my parents, traveling across the country for my undergrad. So I certainly respect it, but it's going to be a big change for all of us. And we're excited and, you know, a little trepidation and all the feelings about that change that's coming in our lives and our family's life.

On top of that, I've got big hopes for my practice for the second half of the year, both in my sort of coaching and consulting role, and then the thing I've talked about a little bit, the launch of this technology product, Greenline Legal, that we're really hoping to get kicked off in the next few months.

So there's a lot going on for me, and I'm trying to balance the excitement and the preparation that I know that I need to do in order to support my goals for the second half of the year, but also just take some time. And I'm being really intentional about preserving some time and using it to decompress and relax and just try to be present in the season as it approaches.

One of the things I know is true is that especially as we start to hit the start of the school year, the start of the fall, September, there's going to be a ton of outside messages trying to break into your psyche, to my psyche, to tell

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us what other people and companies think we should be doing with our time and our businesses and our law practices.

There's going to be some people that are like, you should be worried about this political development or this economic trend, or that you should be adopting this technology or this marketing technique, or that you should be hiring or not hiring or pivoting or scaling or, right, all of these things. And it can be this just cacophony of outside messages. And you know, they already exist, right, right now in the summertime, but I think you and I both know there's going to be an even bigger onslaught of this stuff come September.

And so, again, my hope for you, my hope for myself, is that you can use the summer season to take a step back, to do some introspection, and really consider what you want for the remainder of the year, what your goals are for your practice. I want you to sort of brainstorm and ideate and dream a little bit, but I want you to do it in a way that really connects with your own vision and your own values and your own hopes and needs.

So that you can sort of inoculate yourself from this flurry of attempts that, again, we're already feeling, but we know it's going to get worse by various people and companies to hack your attention and steal your focus away from your priorities and whatever, trying to sell whatever silver bullet or magic beans the legal tech, the legal marketing, even like news and personal wellness and all these things are trying to throw at you.

And hopefully you all feel this, but I also, I want you to have permission, and if I need to give it to you, here it is, but to step away from your practice and just be in the world without having to be an economic driver, without having to be the lawyer, the advisor, the person doing the work for all these other people, right?

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You really deserve to catch a break and do whatever you need to do to make the time and space to get that break. And again, whatever you choose to use it, I'm going to encourage you to do a few things to sort of intentionally disconnect and try to recharge and just a few ideas I'll throw out there, right? None of this is mandate. Hopefully it's helpful to just think about.

Number one, read some fiction or some poetry or, you know, well-written history or biography, whatever captures your attention. But I want you to think about getting some inputs into your brain that are outside of the norm of what you feel like you should be consuming, right? Just go ahead and read some stuff or listen to some stuff if you're an audio person that grabs you.

I would say if at all possible, pay particular attention to good writing and good writers. It's something that Jonah Perlin and I talked about a few weeks ago in his episode. But as more and more of our content gets cobbled together by AI, I think it's really important to ingest materials of different styles that you enjoy, that challenge you, maybe even confuse you a little.

But people and writers that create sentences and structure and meaning in interesting and individualistic ways. Because I do think that there's a thing happening with AI where there's this homogenizing of content that I hope we all can guard against. And I think being diverse and being intentional about what we consume is a big part of that.

Number two, I hope you get out and enjoy some music, some art, some design, right? Pay particular attention to the choices that artists make. When do they do things that are intentionally designed to be accessible, enjoyable? When do they make other choices that maybe add discord or tension or otherwise grab your attention and trigger emotions other than the

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sort of, "Ooh, that's pretty" glaze that is so prevalent again in this AI-generated content. I think we need to be thinking about how to keep breadth and perspective in what we look at and how we think about things.

Number three, and this probably goes without saying, but spend some time in nature, right? Notice the beauty and the patterns and the connection and the nuance of what's going on in the natural world, right? There are thousands, millions of species and animals and creatures and patterns out there that don't care about what's going on in politics. They don't care about what's happening in the news world or in the technology world or whatever else.

And you know, that's not to say they won't be impacted by some of that. They will, right? We are in these wild times, but life goes on and nature goes on. And I think the more you can sort of connect to those bigger patterns, broader patterns about life in general, I think is really important.

And I hate to be too prescriptive in this, but let yourself be bored. It's something I talk about with my teenage sons. Get a break from screens and routines and other things and get yourself in a place where you can be free from active stimulation so that your synapses can rest and draw connections that just might not otherwise be able to break through the noise and the chaos of modern life.

I think it's important to do these things in any season, right? Just as a human, as a being in the world. But I also think that taking the seasonal time to get this break and get this sort of rest and relaxation and reset is really important with this busier fall season that's coming up or for those of you, my friends in the Southern Hemisphere, the spring season that's coming up.

Now, one of my reasons for doing this gets back to the drum I beat all the time, which is the honest reckoning with capacity. And I think when you

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ingest these different things, when you enjoy these different things, it helps you gain a better perspective on, number one, what your capacity really is. Can you sustain this frenetic pace that the world seems to want us to sustain? Or should we try to be a little bit more intentional about limiting how much of our time and attention we spend on work stuff?

And again, all of our capacity is finite. We all have a tendency to overestimate what our capacity is. And so I think doing this reset helps us reconnect to what our actual capacity should be and can be and in a sustainable way.

And then of course, the flip side of that is the brutal assessment of priorities, right? Once you recognize that your capacity is finite, you have to decide what you're going to prioritize that gets that time and attention and what things you're going to let drop. And again, this is really important and really useful as a filter for all of that noise I talked about earlier. Once you've rested and reconnected with your values, then I think you're going to be in a better position to know what are the things I should be doing and what are the things that I can let drop.

And that's actually the last thing that I want to emphasize and leave you with for this short episode, is I hope that as you recharge and relax and take that perspective, one of the things that you're going to come out of it with, and I'll almost go so far as to make this an assignment for you, is figure out what you are going to let go of in your practice.

What are some things that you are doing that you just don't want to be doing anymore, or you shouldn't be doing anymore, or they're running things in a way that are taking up more of your finite capacity than these things are returning in value back to you.

And I talk about that all the time. I mean value certainly in the economic sense, but I mean it more deeply in the sense of connecting with the things

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you value, right? What are your overall goals for what you're trying to accomplish in these next, you know, 5 to 6 months that we have in the rest of the year and obviously on beyond that.

And I won't pretend to know what it is that you should drop. I do know that, you know, most of the law firms and lawyers I work with already have too much legal work in their practice. And so one of the things that I will encourage you to consider is how can we get fewer overall cases but more of the right kinds of cases inside of your practice?

There's a few lenses you can use for making those decisions, as I talked about last week with Danielle. Part of that might be understanding the economic viability and the sort of profit models for different types of cases or different practice areas that you have.

You might like certain types of clients or certain sort of subtypes of cases inside of your practice area, right? I know some divorce lawyers that really like to focus on particular types of people with particular types of problems, right? Mothers with children or high net worth fathers or whatever it happens to be. If it winds your watch and you are interested in it and it serves your values, again, both personally and economically, then focus on those and filter out the rest of it.

Figure out what you need to do to say no to things.

There's some other areas of your practice that you might be able to prune as well, right? If you've got lots of different marketing and outreach efforts, maybe one or two of those isn't performing as well as the others, and you can just stop doing it, or at least hit pause on it for a while. Right? You don't have to be doing all the things just because that's what you've been doing. You're allowed to say no, you're allowed to defer or drop some things.

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Same goes for technology adoption. Right? There's a ton, a ton of messaging out there trying to encourage you to stay on top of all the things, but certainly it's true from my perspective and my experience that there's a lot of improvement work that we can do that has nothing to do with putting new tech into our tech stack.

And so maybe you'll decide that, "Hey, I'm just going to live with the tech I have through the end of the year. I'm going to intentionally block out all of the news around AI or document automation or practice management systems, right? Maybe I'm not going to go to ClioCon this year." Right?

And again, I like ClioCon, I'm not saying you should or shouldn't, but at some point, you just have to start shutting down some of the inputs for things that are grabbing at your time and attention and trying to sway you into other things and being really clear that like, "Nope, I'm going to live with the tech stack I have for a while." That's a really good way to give your brain permission to just sort of shut off that noise. Trust me, it'll be there when you decide to come back and pay attention to it again. It ain't going anywhere.

The last thing I will encourage you to do in this hopefully slightly slower season is to go into your calendar right now and protect big blocks of time and space to make sure that you are doing the on-the-business and the meditative, reflective, intentional, introspective work that you need to do to make sure that, number one, you are continuing to be sustainable.

And that's something I talked about with Dr. Colin James in the episode with him a few weeks ago, where this reflective practice or meditative practice is a really essential and important tool for managing all of the emotional overwhelm that can happen in a law practice, but also making sure that you are connecting with your own intentions and your own values

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and not just sort of running from one fire to the next or one problem to the next.

One of the things that I encourage my clients to do is invest in what I call 5% time. And I think I've talked about this on the podcast before. I don't remember which episode. But it is my contention that you should be preserving at minimum 5% of your working time to be doing on-the-practice, practice improvement, process improvement, systems improvement activities and not being working in the practice in terms of either client delivery work or sort of the back-office admin work, right?

Those are both in-the-practice activities. I want you to be building. And so going into your calendar and claiming that 5% time can be a really useful tool.

And again, I think I've talked about this before. 5% doesn't sound like that much until I put it into hours, and 5% represents half a day every other week in a 40-hour work week. And I encourage you to really try to get to at least that level of commitment.

And so maybe it's going in and blocking off every other Friday morning to be your systems improvement block. And you're going to put that on your calendar, you're going to set it up as a recurring meeting, and you are going to honor it.

If someone wants to schedule an appointment with you, you're going to say, "I'm sorry, I'm not available then. Let's find another time." If someone wants to come in and have something that's on fire, say, "I'm sorry, this needs to wait until this afternoon because I am preserving this block of time. It is sacrosanct for my mental health and for my goals and aspirations for my practice."

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That's certainly true if you're a practice owner. I think it should be true even if you're a worker inside of a practice. And in fact, if you're a practice owner, I would strongly encourage you to come up with blocks of time for each of the people on your team to do this work as well, right?

It's the, what David Allen would call sharpening the saw. Again, maybe you're learning things, maybe you're doing things, maybe you're building things, but it's the kaizen time, to use the lean term, which is continuous improvement. It's the time that is going to help you invest in the future success and build the tools, build the systems that let you be more productive and more intentional in your practice overall.

All right, I'm going to leave it at that for now, right? Three key takeaways. Number one, have a summer. Use the summer, use the season. Get that rest and relaxation and reflection and perspective that this season is really well-suited to providing you if you harness it.

Number two is to really think about some intentionality. And as you get ready to adapt into this busy season that's coming later in the year, take the steps now to preserve some of your capacity to do the work consistently in the future that you know is important to the business, but that if you just let things kind of go organically or go on their own, you know that that time and that space is not going to get preserved. So preserve it now. Take your steps.

Number three, if you would like any help with this, right? If you feel like you are stuck or you're overwhelmed or you're overloaded or you just have so many different possibilities to consider that you want an outside perspective, schedule a call with me. I love doing sessions with lawyers like you, legal professionals of all kinds to sort of reset.

I've got a 90-minute workshop that I do both with individuals and their teams. It's based on this framework that I learned from Mike Burrows. It's

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called From Obstacles to Outcomes, and it's really a great way to sort of figure out: what are you trying to accomplish inside of your practice? What are the obstacles that you perceive as maybe creating barriers to those outcomes?

And then I've got this method that I can help you walk through and work through with your team to make sure that we are able to achieve those outcomes, not by removing the obstacles necessarily, but sometimes in spite of them or even working with them in a way that again is practical and intentional and gives you sort of a good empowering perspective on the practice overall.

To learn more about that session or any other way to connect with me, you can go to the Work with Me link on my website at agileattorney.com and you'll see some options on there. You can also just reach out to me. I'm at john.grant@agileattorney.com, and I'm happy to bounce some ideas around with you over email at first as well, if that's something you're more comfortable with.

All right. As always, this podcast gets production support from the fantastic team at Digital Freedom Productions, and our theme music is "Hello" by Lunara. Thanks for listening, and I'll catch you again next week.