The Myth of the January 1st Reset

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Summary

- The calendar doesn't dictate when change starts; we do. Reinvention can start at any time.
- Contrary to popular belief, most careers do not maintain a continuous spiral upwards and have a few loops de loops.
- Learn to leverage where you are in your progression instead of where you feel you should be.

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Every January, the same ritual begins. The calendar flips, and we're sold on the idea that it's time to start over. New planners are purchased, gym memberships surge, and our

inboxes fill up with invitations to reinvention programs aimed at becoming a “new you.”

Lawyers, in particular, find comfort in this sense of order. Structure is our natural habitat. We occupy the land of timelines, arguments, and predictable next steps. The end of the year is for performance evaluations and reviews, guided by protocols and policy. January 1 feels like a familiar reset button, but renewal doesn’t keep a calendar. Change arrives when it’s ready, not when the clock insists.

We cling to the illusion that progress follows a linear schedule: set a goal, make a plan, execute. The problem isn’t resolutions; it’s our expectation that they’ll run on time. Growth has its own rhythm, is rarely linear, and never obedient.

The Straight-Line Illusion

In our minds, the story runs in a straight line: high school, college, law school, first job, with each step leading neatly to the next. Maybe it’s associate to partner, counsel to general counsel, or government lawyer to agency head. However, we map it, the plotline rarely allows for the loop de loops, stalls, or obstacles that real life includes.

The legal profession reinforces the straight-line illusion at every turn. We track seniority by class year, measure success by titles, and admire résumés that read like ladders. Linear thinking feels safe because it suggests predictability in a profession built on precedent. The message is clear: keep climbing, and you’ll keep progressing.

But anyone who’s practiced long enough knows the story isn’t that tidy. Even as we reach milestones, there are stretches that feel strangely empty. Motivation fades, confidence dips, and our next move is unclear. We can’t explain why we feel flat after a big win or restless in a job we once loved. These in-between seasons often feel like setbacks, but they’re usually a signal that we need to reassess our situation.

The Cycle of Renewal

Philosopher and educator Frederick Hudson offered a more realistic roadmap for change: a cycle that repeats continually throughout our lives and careers. It includes four recurring phases:

1. “Go For It.” During this phase, energy is high, work feels meaningful, and momentum is on the rise.
2. “The Doldrums.” Fatigue sets in. What once motivated you doesn’t. Frustration or boredom creeps in, often right after a big achievement like making partner.

3 “Cocooning.” You feel a strong need for quiet time for reflection, rest, and regrouping.

4 “Getting Ready.” Curiosity and enthusiasm rebound. You’re excited, experimenting, and preparing for the next “Go for It.”

Hudson’s insight was that our movement between these phases isn’t laziness or failure, it’s life. We’re not built for perpetual overdrive. We’re meant to ebb and flow.

The cycle doesn’t climb upward like a staircase; it sweeps like a second hand, circling back around with a new perspective each time. Midnight doesn’t judge noon for being brighter and simply knows its turn will come around again.

The Myth of How We Are Supposed to Feel

Most of us have reached a milestone and wondered why it didn’t feel as good as we expected. I’ve coached lawyers who’ve said, “I just made partner—I should be thrilled,” or trial lawyers who dread what they are supposed to find exhilarating. These moments feel confusing because they challenge what we’ve been taught to expect: success feels joyful, challenge feels exciting, and progress feels safe.

When our feelings don’t match the script, we assume something’s wrong—with us. But emotions can’t be judged and are essential data when evaluating our situation. They can tell us that what once fired us up may be changing or that a new phase in the cycle is beginning.

Emotions ignore both orders and intention. Trying to summon enthusiasm on cue doesn’t work. For lawyers, that can be unsettling as we’re trained to project confidence on demand. Emotional honesty, however, is part of professional maturity too. When our feelings don’t align with our thoughts, it’s a signal to pause, not push.

The Fallow Seasons

Every field needs its fallow season, a time to rest, restore, and regenerate underground. We do too. What looks like emptiness is often restoration in progress.

Consider the government lawyer after a major policy rollout, the in-house counsel after a merger closes, or the litigator between big trials. Even peaks like a promotion, a new role, or a prestigious appointment can lead to natural valleys. Those valleys aren’t regression; they’re recalibration.

For lawyers wired for progress, stillness can feel unbearable. The mind rushes to label it: lazy, unmotivated, losing my edge. But these quieter seasons aren't problems to fix. They're invitations to slow down, reflect, and listen. Renewal can't be rushed; it unfolds when the ground is ready.

Moving Through the Cycle with Awareness

The wisest thing we can do is recognize where we are, not where we wish we were, or where others seem to be. Each phase serves a purpose: The Doldrums invite reflection. Cocooning offers rest. Getting Ready sparks curiosity. Go For It creates momentum. None is better or worse; they're simply parts of the same process.

When we stop demanding that every season behave like summer, we reclaim energy and perspective. Awareness isn't about fixing; it's about attending with the same care we extend to others.

- If you're exhausted, rest without guilt. The world will keep turning while you recover.
- If you're restless, lean on reflection and acts of self-care.
- If curiosity returns, follow it wherever it leads, perhaps a class, a cause, a conversation.
- If you're energized, channel it into your highest priorities. Go for it!

Renewal as a Practice, Not a Resolution

Renewal doesn't come annually like bar dues, and inspiration can't be scheduled, but we can make space for both to appear. Sometimes that means resting while the world gallops ahead. Other times, it means trying something new. Most often, it begins with paying attention to subtle cues about what we need in the moment.

The Jewish New Year falls on a different date each year. This time it began on September 22, and in 2026 it will start on September 11. The variation reminds us that time itself is fluid, and so is growth. The calendar measures time; it doesn't tell us when it's time.

When you feel the current start to move again, that's your new year, unscripted and entirely your own. Renewal isn't an annual event; it's a way of becoming.

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