



## **MY DECISION TO STUDY LAW: A TATTOO ARTIST'S PERSPECTIVE**

*Thomas Wilson<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

This article discusses my career as a tattoo artist, my decision to study law as a mature student and the potential impact that my visible tattoos will have on my legal career. The legal profession has made great strides towards diversity, but I feel that much of the traditional conservatism remains. I have worked in the tattoo industry for eight years. Despite the 'rock and roll' image, most tattoo artists are hard-working, conscientious professionals, providing a service in a highly competitive field. Tattooing is a vocation that can take a lifetime of hard work and dedication to achieve mastery. It took years of my life to become a tattoo artist; this process was not easy. This investment of time, energy and emotion has for a long time prevented me from even considering any other career.

### **Working in the Tattoo Industry**

A modern tattoo machine buzzes: its rotary motor oscillates upwards of one hundred and twenty cycles per second. Despite appearances, a single needle is rarely, if ever used. Even the narrowest line is made using many tiny needles grouped tightly together, piercing the skin and pushing the ink. Abrasion to the skin is minimal, less than two millimeters in depth, but the line is permanent, subjectively speaking. Every minute movement matters. Each mark made, will probably be with that person for the rest of their life. It is hard to describe the sense of responsibility that is involved with this process. In essence this practice has changed little since 'Otzi the iceman' was tattooed in the Alps, roughly five thousand four hundred years ago, technological and hygienic advances notwithstanding.

Many people experience a physiological response to being tattooed. During the process, the body responds by producing endorphins, due in part to the minor physical trauma, as well as the emotional response involved in undergoing a permanent change. Many cultures revere

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<sup>1</sup> Tom is a first-year law student with Plymouth School of Law, Criminology and Government.

the process as a form of personal transformation. Some people imbue the process with a wider symbolic meaning, using tattoos to commemorate important people in their life, or as a representation of their life story. To others a tattoo can be a statement, an exercise in self-expression, or purely aesthetic. Either way, I derive a huge sense of satisfaction from my part in these transformations. It is a moving experience to have a client, upon the completion of their work, be overcome with genuine emotion and gratitude. I have formed a strong personal bond with many of my clients, some of which I have worked with for years. As an artist it is an honour to have someone choose to have your work become a part of themselves. One thing that drew me to tattooing was the value that a tattoo could hold to its owner. In my view it is unlikely that even the most ardent art lover could ever care more for their favorite painting, than someone who truly loves their own tattoo.

Unfortunately, this sense of achievement can be tempered with anxiety; a fear that the project may not live up to your own or your client's expectations. This happens to all artists at some point. The vast gulf between these emotional states acts as a powerful driving force that fuels many tattooists to constantly strive for betterment. As with most artwork, the merit of any tattoo is subjective. I feel that self-criticism has been fundamental to my artistic progression, but I have also found this to be the most difficult aspect of the work.

Tattoos elicit a wide range of reactions from the public, running the gamut from fascination to unmasked contempt. I feel that globally, this tension has led to the tattoo industry becoming relatively insular from much of mainstream society. In many cultures throughout history, tattooing has been expressly prohibited. In these situations, tattoos unsurprisingly have come to be viewed primarily as expressions against the establishment. This connotation unfortunately endures to this day. In my experience people's true motives for getting tattooed are often unpredictable and varied, and many commonly held presumptions pertaining to them are inherently flawed. Tattooing has a rich and varied history across the world, with hundreds of distinct traditions and styles. In the last twenty years there has been an explosion of popular interest. There have been several popular television programs based on the subject, but these afford but the tiniest glimpse into an amazing colourful industry.

### **The Decision to Transition to Studying Law**

People have expressed surprise that in addition to working as a tattoo artist I have chosen to study law. My interest in law developed through a coming together of other related interests. As a subject it overlaps many areas that fascinate me, including politics, philosophy, history and psychology. It does not limit itself only to abstract reasoning, but it also has practical effect.

I came to realise that many of my favourite books and films revolved around legal themes. It is only recently that I have appreciated the ubiquity of law in fiction, as well as in day to day life.

I aspire for a career where, like tattooing, my work is meaningful; I would like to make some kind of a difference. That is not to say that I approach this goal with delusions of grandeur. I appreciate the complexity and competitiveness of the UK legal system, and recognise the reality of playing a part in a process much larger than myself. Having said that, I take inspiration from the individuals like Lords Bingham and Denning that have brought about significant progress and much needed reform.

My first taste of studying law was online, in my spare time. I had previously taken part in a number of other short courses, through the website Coursera<sup>2</sup>. As an organization Coursera works in conjunction with universities, to provide online courses free of charge, usually between six and ten weeks in length. Originally I never considered these in relation to any future career goals. I am grateful to the Coursera project for giving me the opportunity to study many different subjects without financial commitment. This was instrumental in my decision to study law at university full time. I have a great respect for the ethos of the project generally and would recommend their courses.

Reading *The Secret Barrister* was perhaps my first meaningful peek in to the world of the legal practitioner.<sup>3</sup> The majority of the book consists of a searing indictment of the current state of legal aid and the working conditions at the criminal Bar but perversely this only served to energise me further. Despite the long working hours, the unpredictable wages and the emotional strain, the text effectively conveyed the true importance of the work. I began to consider the importance of law and the crucial role that it plays in people's lives. I read around the subject further, and found that I was particularly passionate about miscarriages of justice. I feel that some injustice in law is inevitable; morality is not always clear cut and any conclusion drawn from evidence is fallible. However, injustice can needlessly arise from apathy, presumption, incompetence or malign intent. If I am able to contribute towards reducing such injustice at all, I will be proud to do so.

I spent quite some time deliberating whether or not to apply to study law full time. A degree is a lifetime commitment that involves investment of a huge amount of time as well as debt, and

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<sup>2</sup> <<https://www.coursera.org>> accessed 17 November 2019

<sup>3</sup> *The Secret Barrister.*, *The SECRET Barrister* (2018, Macmillan)

this is offset further by the potential loss of earnings from existing work. I also experienced feelings of disloyalty both to my colleagues and to 'my calling' as a tattoo artist. I felt that making this decision could be viewed as selling short my long held creative aspirations. Forming an overarching ambition early in life can be problematic, as you have no idea of what the day to day reality of your aspiration really is, nor the kind of person you will eventually be.

Upon reflection I realized that my feelings of guilt were unfounded. Currently I am still working as a tattoo artist, and will do in conjunction with my studies for as long as it is practically viable. I have no intention of quitting tattooing entirely, but I am happy for it to take a back seat. One of the advantages of being self-employed is the flexibility that allows me to continue both roles, as tattoo artist and law student. Fortunately my colleagues have all been incredibly supportive. My loyalty to the tattoo industry has not diminished. The freedom to do both is liberating, if time consuming. Ultimately a combination of factors won out: my passion for law in terms of finding the content engaging and important, a belief that I may be well suited to the work, a desire to make a difference, a desire to help people, ambition and perhaps a small amount of obstinacy.

### **Fears of Acceptance in the Legal Sector with Visible Tattoos**

Deciding to embark on a new course of study as a mature student can seem daunting. It had been over a decade since my last formal examination. Being in my thirties (and heavily tattooed) I worried that I might not fit in with my peers on a law course. I also had concerns that I was being too self-indulgent. I appreciate how lucky I am to have a job that I love. Deciding to leave that behind may seem somewhat reckless, especially to pursue a line of work that I only had a limited knowledge of, most of which was cobbled together from books and documentaries.

I also had to consider the effect that my tattoos could have on my employability. I have taken every opportunity to ask lawyers whether they think my tattoos will hold me back in the legal sector. The responses I have received so far have been mixed, from polite pessimism to passionate encouragement. I understand that there has been great progress with regard to promoting diversity in the legal sector and that this is an ongoing process. Pragmatically, I understand that unless there is a great shift in current attitudes, there will be some doors that will be irrevocably shut to those with visible tattoos. Whilst tattoo removal methods are available, they are costly, painful and potentially damaging to the skin. I believe that if I were to have my tattoos removed through necessity, I would be complicit in this discrimination. I find it a great shame that even an industry that is based on reason and fairness, can still be

prone to arbitrary discrimination. With regard to my career prospects, I am of the opinion that I may have to work that little bit harder to compensate, and possibly be more flexible with my career options, but I am cautiously optimistic.

### **Studying Law at Plymouth**

My concerns over life as a mature student were unfounded. My experience so far has been extremely positive. I have found all of the students and staff to be friendly and welcoming. As I expected, there are not many of us on the course with visible tattoos, but I have not felt excluded. I have been particularly impressed with the level of dedication shown, not only by the academic staff but also by the other students. In particular those involved in the organisation of the events and societies. Since my studies commenced, I have been involved in two societies and four competitions, all of which have been ran by students. All those involved have gone to great lengths to exercise inclusivity. As well as being enjoyable this has made the transition to student life far easier. Since commencing my studies I have become a course rep. This has been a positive experience, through which I have had the opportunity to meet people that I otherwise may not have done. I am glad to be able to play a part within the functioning of the university, and to represent my fellow students. I feel that this role has also helped me integrate into university life.

My perspective as a new student of law is different from that of a seasoned professional. I am conscious of the fact that when starting on a new path in life, there is a tendency to view it through 'rose tinted glasses'. I have had no opportunity for disillusionment. I realise that a career in law can be tough, emotionally as well as intellectually. I realise there will be aspects of the career not readily obvious to an outside observer, and that some of these may be difficult. Despite the inherent difficulties of transitioning back to academia, there are some advantages to being a mature student. Many of the skills developed in the workplace have direct application to university life, for instance: people skills, organisation, resilience and perseverance, to name but a few. Speaking from personal experience, I am more equipped to focus on my academic studies now, in my thirties, than I was as a teenager.

I am grateful to have the opportunity to learn something new at this stage in my life. I find higher education incredibly exciting. To learn in an environment surrounded by such a wide range of practitioners and academics is inspiring. There is a sense of energy that comes from working within such a hub of different ideas, and so far I have enjoyed it immensely. Regardless of which direction my career ultimately takes, I feel that I have made the right decision, for the right reasons.