

[LPM – The Thriving Lawyer – September/October 2021]

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[Headline] Why You Need to Sharpen Your Sword

[Byline] By Anne E. Collier

During the spring each year, Charlemagne headed off to battle in order to unify Europe, which he accomplished. He was said to be a religious man, a great administrator, intelligent and strategic. During his rule from 768 A.D. to 813 A.D., he required that schools be opened and enacted educational reforms. He was busy. But Charlemagne also rested, and enjoyed banquets, time with family and friends, horseback riding, swimming, bathing in natural hot springs and hunting. We all can imagine that he sharpened his sword, literally. In the figurative sense, we also know that Charlemagne sharpened his sword—took care of himself by taking a break.

Lawyers' most important tool is their mind. A lawyer's mind must be sharp to be effective. But just like a sword of war, a chef's knife, and the tools of a tradesman, constant use without care results in a dull, near useless tool. If you've ever gone to bed at night not knowing how to solve a problem and woke up knowing what to do, you know the value of sharpening your sword. If you've deigned to take a weekend off and come back refreshed and invigorated about your work, you know the value of sharpening your sword.

A "sharp" mind—optimal performance—requires hyperfocus, trust and flow, according to Dr. William Sparks. "Hyperfocus" is an intense form of mental concentration or visualization focused on a task or activity. It's where strategy comes from. There is no doubt that warriors and lawyers alike must be able to concentrate and visualize outcomes. In fact, lawyers tend to score high on hyperfocus, which Sparks measures in his Actualized Leader Profile. The short-form version can be found at [alpfree.com/arudia](http://alpfree.com/arudia).

"Trust" is the trust in oneself and others. Abraham Maslow, a renowned psychologist, describes self-actualizing people as trusting their judgment, gut and instinct. While self-actualized people are open to other's ideas and changing their view or analysis, they do not seek validation from others. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, also a renowned psychologist, identified the concept "flow" as being a highly focused mental state conducive to optimal performance. Flow occurs when you lose yourself in a project, hobby or sport. It's when you're "in the zone" or "on a roll."

Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, "If I only had an hour to chop down a tree, I would spend the first 45 minutes sharpening my axe." The point being that if you don't take care of your tools—the mind in a lawyer's case—you are ill prepared for work and consequently are ineffectual. And yet, the myth many lawyers tell themselves is that to do better they need to work harder and minimize the time away from work. How much stress a lawyer can take becomes a badge of honor.

According to Sparks, maintaining a sharp mind requires deliberate renewal, the components of which are optimal time orientation, self-acceptance and a little solitude. "Optimal time

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orientation” means having a balanced sense of time and living mostly in the present, paying attention without judgment. It is being mindful. It also means having a “lessons-learned mindset” rather than one of deep regret when it comes to mistakes. Optimism, not anxiety, about the future characterizes those with optimal time orientation.

Self-acceptance means accepting your strengths, your weaknesses and what you haven’t yet accepted about yourself. Self-acceptance requires you to recognize who you are in everything you do. Lastly, everyone, even those who consider themselves to be extroverts, needs a little solitude to reflect, plan or engage in hobbies.

### **Six Skills for Sharpening Your Sword**

It’s indisputable that Charlemagne was a success. And it wasn’t just physical prowess; it was mental prowess as well. He knew how to deal with stress through renewal as evidenced by the fact that he lived far beyond the expected life for men at the time. For those who don’t value renewal for renewal’s sake (and for those who do), but do value a sharp sword, here are six skills for doing just that.

1. **Guard your hyperfocus.** Charlemagne didn’t answer email while on a call or analyze a contract while on the battlefield—at least not simultaneously. Charlemagne, or any swordsman worth his salt, knows that failure to focus sharply can have deadly results. You can’t win a battle with a divided focus—you’re not doing anything particularly well. Multi-switching between tasks robs you of uninterrupted think time and sets you up for mediocrity.
2. **Thrust yourself into trust.** In addition to thorough work, trust in yourself requires optimal time orientation—it requires slowing down in order to *be here now* so that you can pay attention to everything with a curious (not obsessive) mind. It’s by paying attention that you develop deep trust in yourself; you sharpen your ability to notice what escaped you before, even possibly the thrust of another’s sword. When it comes to lack of trust in one’s warriors, it’s typically the result of a miscommunication of marching orders or lack of training. Be realistic (not damning) about associates’ skills, and curious about what went awry and why. Then, take the time to strategize a better battle plan.<sup>1</sup>
3. **Find flow.** The title of Csikszentmihalyi’s book *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* seems to say it all. Flow, by definition is constant and uninterrupted. Set yourself up for success in battle by retreating from digital distractions.

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<sup>1</sup> See Collier, A.E., *The Power of An Accountability Partnership*. Law Practice January/February 2021; Collier, A.E., *It’s Not You. It’s Not Me. It’s Our System.*, Law Practice May/June 2021.

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4. **Optimally orient your focus.** “Optimal time orientation” is just that because it’s where you are most effective. Dwelling on past mistakes or anxiety about the future dulls the sword, thereby depleting warriors’ capacity to sustain their virility on and off the battlefield. Distraction from the present is costly. You can’t do anything *in* the past or *in* future. And you certainly cannot be effective in the present if your focus is overly elsewhere. You only get to focus on one thing at a time. Choose.
5. **Amplify ability by accepting what is so.** Failing to accept one’s self is denial. Denial cripples your capacity to strategize, which increases the likelihood that you will not overcome threats, whether they be a personal shortcoming or client problem. Add to that the psychic energy spent on denial, and you can see why self-acceptance is essential to renewal. Energy spent on self-improvement rather than self-deception is energy well spent.
6. **Celebrate solitude.** Given the socially distanced year-and-a-half we’ve had, it may seem ridiculous to recommend solitude. And yet, solitude is necessary to renew. Consider a time when you’ve just exercised, gardened or read a good book. You feel renewed, but also the strategy for the next advance or parry appears.

Notice how these six skills, although presented as either performance enhancing or renewal enhancing, do both. Just as success in battle depends on both edges of a sword being sharp, success in law depends on both edges of your mind being consistently sharpened.

**[Bio Box] Anne E. Collier** is the CEO of Arudia, a firm dedicated to improving culture, collaboration and communication. Collier is an expert leadership coach steadfast in her commitment to excellence and her clients’ goals. She coaches and delivers programming designed to help individuals, teams and organizations amplify accomplishments, improve financial stability and achieve greater self-actualization; they perform well because they are confident, deliberate and resilient. [anne@arudia.com](mailto:anne@arudia.com)