

Tough Love for Lawyers

Review by Eric Cooperstein

“The Practice – Brutal Truths About Lawyers and Lawyering” by Brian Tannebaum. ABA 2014, 289 pages.

In the years since the Great Recession and the steep decline in employment opportunities for new lawyers, a common refrain has been that law schools do a poor job of teaching students how to actually practice law. Graduates with six-figure student-loan balances have found themselves starting their own practices with very little training in how to go about finding clients and earning a living. There seems to be a perpetual shortage of mentors to help new lawyers find their way.

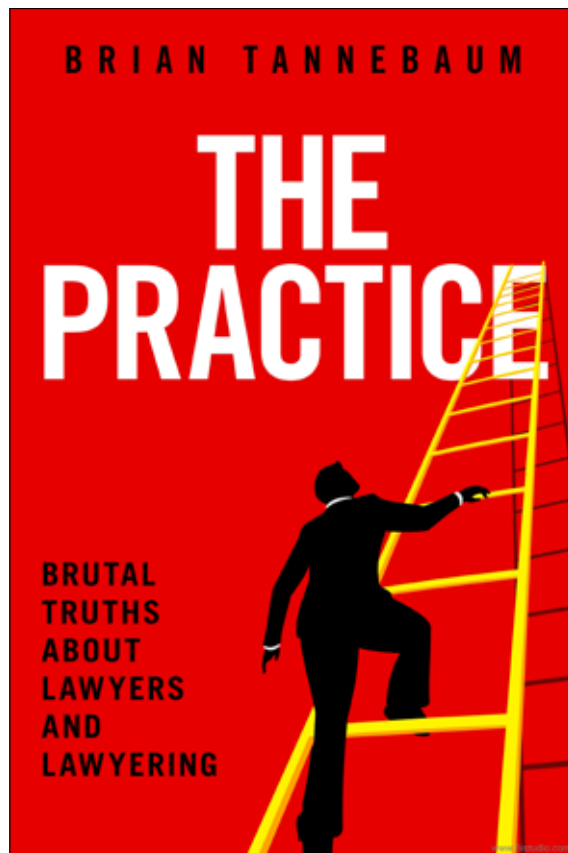
Enter Florida attorney Brian Tannebaum. *The Practice* is a collection of Tannebaum’s best blog posts, arranged by topic and edited for presentation in a book. Most legal bloggers do not have enough substance or volume to attempt to put together a book of their posts. Tannebaum has both, although his substance is not for the faint of heart.

In the interest of full disclosure, I sort of “met” Tannebaum online somewhere around 2008 or 2009. In the early years of my practice I blogged occasionally at *Lawyerist.com*, while Tannebaum was blogging weekly or daily (maybe even hourly) on his own site, *My Law License*. Our practices overlap: a substantial part of Tannebaum’s practice, like mine, is devoted to representing lawyers. He wrote provocative posts, frequently expressing his skepticism—or

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outright antipathy—toward the popular advice that law practices could be built on a foundation of high-priced website SEO (Search Engine Optimization), a laptop, and a comfy seat by the fireplace at Starbucks. Eventually, Tannebaum and I met in person through the Association of Professional Responsibility Lawyers. We are not Facebook friends.

This is a book for lawyers just starting law practices and also for those already in practice and trying to find their way. Tannebaum’s no-nonsense,



blunt, staccato style urges lawyers to figure out who they are, what they want, and how they are going to achieve it. It’s not a formula or a three-step simple recipe for a more successful you. It’s a tough-love pep talk, centered on the importance of personal values, trust in one’s gut, and basic relationship-building. For Tannebaum, building a practice is about working hard, connecting with people, and showing up: old-fashioned advice for modern times.

Tannebaum’s style is compelling. His sentences, like his advice, are pithy and direct. Although his writing can be uneven at times, he knows how to turn a phrase. For example, when describing the candor of his own mentors, he notes that “Hugs and tissues are not part of the relationship.”

Fair warning: Tannebaum’s missives have a target. Marketers of high-priced, get-clients-quick SEO leave him incensed. He has no patience for unemployed law graduates who whine that their law schools misled them about their job prospects and that their last student loan payments will be made with their social security checks. And if you don’t have an office and like to meet clients and work out of coffee shops, well, you won’t

find any praise in *The Practice*.

This book would be well worth a read while waiting for one’s bar exam results to come in or during the slow periods in a new practice, when you’re thinking about taking on a new practice area or sinking a lot of money into internet advertising to try to generate new clients. I might not try to read it all in one sitting. By the end, you might feel like the horse has been beaten beyond recognition. But in appropriate doses it should build your confidence and help you stick to your game plan.

You’re not going to agree with everything Tannebaum says. You may not agree with anything he says. He may make you mad. You may curse him under your breath. But you’ll have a lot to think about when you’re done. And you’ll enjoy it.

By Eric Cooperstein. Mr. Cooperstein has a solo-practice devoted to legal ethics. He has just completed five years of service as an officer of the HCBA. He is also the chair of the Hennepin Lawyer Committee for 2015-16.