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Negotiating Weaknesses*

Mary Whisner**

Ms. Whisner discusses how knowing our weaknesses allows us to compensate for them. She also considers what constitutes an acceptable answer to the dreaded interview question, "What are your weaknesses?"

¶1 Nobody's perfect. We all know that, right? And yet, for many of us, it's very hard to talk about our weaknesses. I started musing about this after a conversation with one of our library's interns, who was caught off guard when an interviewer asked him to name his. (It's also hard to talk about our strengths, but that's a topic for another piece.)

¶2 The reluctance to disclose weaknesses is significant for job applicants: of course they want the employer to think they're totally terrific in every way. So they fear naming a fatal flaw or listing too many weaknesses. And yet they have to answer the question.

¶3 Although the need to confront one's weaknesses might seem most obvious when someone asks point-blank, we all have to deal with them throughout our professional lives. (Of course, we have to deal with them in our private lives, too, but this column is about work.) It's common to want to keep weaknesses under wraps: we all want to seem competent, to have our supervisors, coworkers, and patrons think we're exemplary librarians—top-notch at our jobs.

¶4 The bar is high. For instance, consider the description of the sort of student Marian Gallagher said she wanted in her law librarianship program:

We shall still have occasional difficulty in locating, at the proper time, willing victims who are industrious, alert, charming, attentive to detail, refined, imaginative, unafraid of briefing for a judge or getting filthy shifting books, dependable, receptive to taking and following orders, able to direct underlings to inspired heights, incorruptible, sincerely interested, attractive (and if women, not interested in persons who think a woman's place is in the home), amusing, cheerful, imperturbable, diplomatic, and Summa Cum Laude.¹

Oh, my—that's quite a list! Undoubtedly Mrs. Gallagher² was using hyperbole: so few people possess all those qualities that the program might never have had a

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1. Marian G. Gallagher, *The Law Librarianship Course at the University of Washington*, 5 J. LEGAL EDUC. 537, 539 (1952–53).

2. I usually use "Ms." instead of "Mrs." or "Miss," but Mrs. Gallagher was universally known as that—or as "Mrs. G."

student. In fact, some of those qualities are in tension with each other. A person who is “amusing” might not be optimally “diplomatic”; one who is “imperturbable” might not appear “sincerely interested”; one who is “refined” and “attractive” might hesitate before “getting filthy shifting books.” It’s a lot to aspire to.

¶5 But you don’t have to be familiar with Mrs. Gallagher’s daunting list of desired qualities to have a sense that you might fall short. Our field is interesting and worthwhile because it is so wonderfully challenging, calling on a wide range of skills and knowledge. The downside of the diverse challenges is that some of them will be especially hard because of your particular collection of weaknesses. If you are terrified of public speaking, then it will be harder to teach; if you have trouble remembering details, then working through some research problems will be excruciating.

¶6 Everyone has weaknesses. Really. The employer who asks a candidate to talk about them isn’t expecting a perfect person. If anyone says, “Oh, I don’t really have any weaknesses worth mentioning,” then the employer will think that person is disturbingly arrogant, lacking in self-awareness, or a liar.³ Instead, the question is meant to elicit some comments that show the candidate has thought about how to do good work despite weaknesses.

¶7 In middle age, well along in my work life, I am increasingly aware that I am still struggling with most of the same weaknesses I’ve faced for a very long time—since childhood, really. I have learned ways to address them and minimize the damage they can cause, but I haven’t overcome them.

¶8 For example, mornings are hard for me. Getting ready for elementary school was tough: once pried out of bed, I often couldn’t find my shoes or whatever else I needed to head out the door on time. I got there, but I also regularly racked up tardy notes in the attendance log. I loved my tenth-grade history class, but it started at eight o’clock, so I often heard the teacher greet me with “Ah, Ms. Whisner! Better late than never, I always say.” Maybe my weekday sluggishness was caused by my family’s late-night habits on Fridays and Saturdays (we’d stay up, playing cards and watching TV, until my mother came home from her restaurant job). But I might not have been a morning person even without that conditioning.

¶9 Now, some forty years past tenth grade, I still find it hard to get going in the morning, but I have developed some coping mechanisms. Especially in the winter, I get a little boost from a bright light (designed for seasonal affective disorder). My workplace is flexible enough that I can often go in at, say, 9:30 instead of 8:00. If I’m speaking to an 8:30 class, I leave a note for myself in the bathroom, so I see it just before going to bed and as soon as I get up. My partner reminds me, “You’re on the desk at 9:00” or “You said you wanted to go in at 8:00 to gather material for your 8:30 class.” I still am not a morning person, but I am able to show up when it’s important.

3. Some people have tried sleight of hand, naming a weakness, such as being a perfectionist or a workaholic, that they believe the employer will value as a strength. But experienced managers know that perfectionism and workaholicism really are weaknesses that can get in the way of productivity and good relations.

¶10 Another weakness is that I am not a strong planner. I don't naturally use to-do lists and calendars, but because I can't hold everything in my head, I've had to learn to use them. I keep up a calendar, with reference shifts, classes, meetings, colloquia and lectures I plan to attend, and social activities, and it's very useful. And yet, it still doesn't come naturally to me to look at it and plan out my week and month. Unfortunately, I sometimes have to scramble to prepare for a presentation because I forgot about it until the day of the class. The good news is that I'm pretty good at pulling things together in a few hours. Most of the time I do see what's coming up, and for big projects I've learned to put notes in my calendar a week or two ahead of the deadline. Technology helps: my desktop computer and my iPad both flash reminders fifteen minutes before meetings, reference shifts, and so on. Sometimes I'll be lost in a project and will be quite surprised to see that it's time to go, but the fifteen minutes allows me time to get there (even if I've forgotten to go to lunch first).

¶11 This weakness can lead to mistakes. Not long ago, I had a meeting with two colleagues and the library director. It was on my calendar, but I didn't look at the calendar before I left to take my dog to the park, thinking I had plenty of time before my next commitment. When the meeting was supposed to start, one of the colleagues called me on my cell phone. I hightailed it back to the library, but I was half an hour late. I apologized for inconveniencing them, they accepted my apology, and we had our meeting. They understood that I flaked out, and I understood, too—sometimes good people make mistakes. Several years ago, when I was depressed, a similar incident hit me hard: I forgot about a meeting, got there late, apologized abjectly, and felt awful, to the point of tears. Having tried it both ways, I can report that feeling worthless and incompetent doesn't lead to any better results than apologizing, trying to do better, and moving on.

¶12 It is also more constructive to acknowledge the weakness than to hide it or pretend that others don't notice. By acknowledging that I can forget about time and appointments, I make it okay for my colleagues to help me out. I welcome a reminder: "Remember that we have a collection development meeting at 8:30 tomorrow, and it's in Room 115, not the conference room." Rather than feeling that I'm a failure because I really should be able to keep track of everything myself, I feel supported by my friends and colleagues, valued enough that they want to help me and have me participate in the meeting.

¶13 It is hard to break bad habits and to create good ones,⁴ but it's possible.⁵ Despite dentists' and dental hygienists' advice and encouragement, I didn't floss

4. I have a vivid memory of an English teacher reading a Mark Twain quotation to this effect. I looked for it, anticipating the smug satisfaction of confirming my memory. But of course I can't find it, and now I think my memory was addled. Having a good memory for things like that is one of my strengths—but even a strength isn't surefire.

5. A recent book presents (very accessibly) some brain science about habit, illustrated with a variety of real-life stories (a problem gambler, a football coach, a man with a neurological injury). The author concludes with an appendix advising people how to apply the lessons to their own lives and describing his own success in overcoming the habit of taking a cookie break every afternoon at work. CHARLES DUHIGG, *THE POWER OF HABIT* (2012).

Habits never really disappear. They're encoded into the structures of our brain, and that's a huge advantage for us, because it would be awful if we had to relearn how to drive after every vacation.

The problem is that your brain can't tell the difference between bad and good habits, and so if you have a bad one, it's always lurking there, waiting for the right cues and rewards.

Id. at 20. And yet there's hope: "[E]very habit, no matter its complexity, is malleable." *Id.* at 270.

regularly for years and years, until I made flossing a New Year's resolution once and it stuck. But not all my resolutions (in January or at any other time) have fared as well. I plan to tidy up my desk and keep it tidy, but other things capture my attention, and I allow filing to fall behind. Over the years, I have set up systems for keeping track of short-term and long-term projects. I've used different technologies: three-ring binder, folder, pocket-sized notebook, Palm Pilot, index cards, iPad. I use each system diligently for a while, and I feel some satisfaction in having organized lists at my fingertips. Then I stop writing down tasks or I write them on small slips of paper that I carry in my pockets or scatter on my desk, instead of using the more organized system. Or I forget to look at the lists. Anyway, the system breaks down. I don't think these failures mean I should stop trying, but I realize that I'm probably never going to find it easy to be organized and tidy.

¶14 I have other weaknesses, but this is enough to share for now. Talking about one's weaknesses (or even thinking about them) feels risky: the weaknesses can balloon and take up all the space in the room. If I tell you that I have piles of papers on my desk, I can't always find what I need, I've forgotten reference shifts, and I've missed meetings, will you think that's the whole story—or even the dominant theme—of my work life? On a bad day (like that day I cried because I was late to a meeting), I can believe something like that.⁶

¶15 Of course, there is a lot more to anyone than a few weaknesses. I feel confident enough to discuss mine publicly because many of my other attributes, including some good ones, are already public. If you have read this column before, you probably have a sense that I am able to complete writing assignments and I know some things about research and being a reference librarian. If you've worked with me, you know that I do a good job in class presentations and I don't forget every reference shift or meeting—in fact, I'm pretty reliable overall. So it's not much of a risk to reveal my weaknesses.

¶16 But the intern I mentioned at the start of this essay probably doesn't feel that safety. He's applying for his first professional job and doesn't have decades of productivity to buffer the sting of a weakness or two. What should he do? In a way, it's what I've done here: discuss a weakness along with ways that he compensates for it. He has succeeded and will succeed in spite of it. If I were interviewing applicants, I would respect answers like these:

- “I've learned that really big projects can overwhelm me. I've found that it helps me if I break them down into pieces and create deadlines for each piece.”
- “I don't have much experience with public speaking, and I still get pretty nervous when I have to give a presentation. It helps when I practice in front of a friend. One thing that excites me about this job is that I'd have the opportunity to give lots of presentations and get more comfortable. I'd welcome your feedback to help me improve.”
- “When I started working at the reference desk I was really affected by patrons' moods. If they were agitated or demanding, I got agitated myself.”

6. See Mary Whisner, *On Having a Bad Day*, 94 LAW LIBR. J. 335, 2002 LAW LIBR. J. 22.

I've learned to calm myself down by taking a breath and reminding myself that their moods are *their* moods, but I see this as something I'll have to continue to work on."

- "Sometimes I can misunderstand a question when I hear it. Now I keep a pad of paper handy and I take notes as the patron talks. This helps me focus—and it has the added benefit of showing the patron that I take the question seriously."
- "I don't know as much about working with computers as I'd like. I've been able to get help and learn a lot about HTML by working on projects with more experienced people. If I get this job, I'd like to explore taking a web design course to improve my skills."

¶17 Weaknesses? We all have some. The trick is to face them and figure out ways to deal with them. That doesn't always mean erasing them entirely. There are ways to be productive and do great work despite them. Being aware of them is the first step. How you compensate depends on what your weaknesses are, but no matter what the weakness, there's probably some way to work around it.

