Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

Alison Monahan: Hello and welcome to the Law School Toolbox podcast. We're here to help you get the most out of your law school experience. Your Law School Toolbox hosts are Alison Monahan, that's me, and Lee Burgess. We're the co creators of the Law School Toolbox, Bar Exam Toolbox, the Catapult Conference, and the Trebuchet Legal Careers site.

I also run the Girl's Guide to Law School in all of my spare time. Each episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast is designed to demystify the law school and early legal career experience so you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review on iTunes.

And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolbox.com or by emailing Alison, A L I S O N,@LawSchoolToolbox.com. Or Lee, L E E, @LawSchoolToolbox.com. And with that, let's get started. In this episode, we'll be talking about one of our favorite topics, learning.

Stay tuned.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to be discussing one of our very favorite topics, learning. I know you're shocked that this is a topic we find interesting, but we do. Especially right now, when I'm actually living in Mexico and doing my best to learn Spanish, and Lee is watching her almost one year old son who's learning new stuff every day.

We're pretty convinced that the lessons from learning a language or learning to walk apply equally to learning in law school. So let's get started. Lee, why don't you talk a bit about your son? He's almost a year old and he's learning and growing every day. Literally. How does he approach learning? What's different about what he's doing from what we do as adults?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, it's been really fascinating. So first I should say that when I got pregnant and had my son, I really didn't know that much about babies. So all of this has been new to me, watching him reach his developmental milestones and learn new stuff every day. But as I've watched my son learn, I've noticed a few things that have really made me think.

The first, and probably the biggest one, is how much he practices every new skill until he gets it right. So, one of the things that I think can be rough as we get older is this willingness to continue to practice. And so when my son decides that he wants to crawl, or talk, or walk, I just noticed that he starts to do the same thing over and over again, day after day, until he figures it out.

And that's something I feel like we lose a little bit as adults. I also see that he has no fear of failure. He pretty much assumes that he's going to fall down over and

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

over again until he gets it right. Like today, we were taking a walk back from our coffee shop breakfast date this morning, and he really decided he wanted to walk up this steep hill because if you walk anywhere with a kid in San Francisco, you end up finding a steep hill.
And he really does not have the balance to walk up a steep hill, but he would walk a few steps and then he would sit down And then he'd think about it for a while, and then he'd try and stand up, and he'd sit down, and then he'd turn a different way, and try and stand up and sit down, and it was pretty amazing, like, he has no qualms about not being able to do it, he just says, well, I'm just gonna keep experimenting until I figure it out, and I think that's another thing that we lose as we get older, because he's not self conscious about anything that he does. The other thing that I find very interesting is the fact that he watches other kids for ideas of things to try. I mean, he intently studies kids at the park, or if we have a play date, or anything like that. And I think that that's something else that we kind of forget. That sometimes we need to really observe other people, or learn about other people how they're learning how to do things that we might want to do, and then try them out, because we're not 100 percent sure what's going to work for us. So it's been very fascinating. You know, kids learn at this incredible rate this first year. They learn so, you know, much information and they take in so much information. They're, they're basically a sponge, but his diligence at learning tasks and his focus has been pretty amazing to watch.

Alison Monahan: Now, I think your last point is a really interesting one because I remember when I was much younger, you know, watching the older kids and it wasn't this sense of like, Oh, like I'll never be able to do that. Or there's, I mean, you might be like, Oh, they're so cool. Like, I wish I could do that. But you always assumed that you could learn that, too. I mean, I remember a friend of mine teaching me to blow bubbles with gum, and I thought it was, like, the best thing ever, but literally, you know, it took me a half day to learn how to blow a bubble and we kind of forget, I think, that we all had to learn everything that we know.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And, you know, right now he's trying to learn how to talk, and he, you know, he's trying to mimic words, and he has, of course, his favorite words that he's trying to work on.
None of his words that he's trying to work on actually are, like, mama. I'll just go ahead and throw that out there. But, he's really into practical words, like, like, out, and truck, and things like that. But, what is interesting is even that. I mean, he, he knows he's not necessarily saying it right, but he keeps trying.

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

You know, until he's gonna get it right. He doesn't care. You know, he knows that saying, you know, bubba is not the same thing as saying Bubbles, but he's just, that's as close as he's gonna get, and he knows if he points and says bubba, you know, someday he's gonna say bubbles, but that, that's, you know, that's still kind of him working on getting to his goal.
He's not worried that he might sound kind of funny because he's not saying the correct words.

Alison Monahan: That's actually really funny, because the particular word you picked, because last night I was with a friend of mine in Mexico, and he speaks Spanish, and He asked me what the English word was for puddle, and it's actually a really hard word to say if you're not a native English speaker.
So it's kind of like bubbles. I was like, no, it's not poodle, puddle, pedal, it's puddle.

Lee Burgess: Absolutely. So yeah, I think it's, it's pretty amazing how, You know, they just continue to try things over and over again. And to watch him learn language. He's also learning sign language, baby sign language, and you know, he'll, more is his favorite sign, but it's amazing what he's decided, you know, that sign works for, too, you know?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I know my friend was teaching her kid baby sign language, and again, it was constantly again, again. Like, I went over to their house one day and I was juggling, and it was just like, again, again, again. I had to juggle for literally, like, you know, two hours.

Lee Burgess: Oh, yeah.
It's amazing how many times you can read a book over and over and over again. But again, the repetition, I think that's the other thing that kids are so good at is just appreciating that in life, you know, to really appreciate what's going on or to learn a new skill, they do it. Are good with repetition.
You know, if they don't understand how the bubbles work, they want you to blow bubbles for a half hour so they can watch the bubbles , you know, if they my kid really loves construction sites because we live near a construction site right now, and, you know, he wants to watch the dump truck over and over again.
He's trying to figure out. You know, how the dump truck works.

Alison Monahan: And what is it doing, right?

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

Lee Burgess: What is it doing? And then he comes home and points to his toy dump truck. Cause of course I've now had to get him a toy dump truck. And then then he pulls out his truck book and he wants to like find the pictures of the dump truck and put everything together.
And. You know, that again, we'll do that daily, sometimes multiple times a day, but he's just trying to put. Things together as he learns them. And it's all very innocent and, and basic and honest because he's not worried about the perceptions around learning. And I think, you know, our perceptions around how other people think we're learning or, you know, whether or not we're smart enough to learn this information as we get older it just becomes so much more complicated.
I mean you've been in Mexico City now for a few months, I'm sure that you have really had to struggle with kind of perceptions about learning while working on your Spanish.

Alison Monahan: Yes, well, certainly my own perceptions since I'm not exactly a person who is, you know, used to being terrible at things. And frankly, you know, my Spanish is not very good.
It's still not very good, but it's definitely it's getting better. I can say with authority is getting better. You know, my housekeeper said the other day, like, wow, you seem to really be understanding more of what I'm saying to you than you did a few weeks ago. And that is indeed true, but I mean, to be honest, it's been, you know, it's been, I think, around basically right around two months, maybe seven weeks. And it's been a frustrating process. You know, you sort of have this idea of, Oh, I'm just going to drop into this new country and everything's going to be great. And, you know, my Spanish is going to get better in like a week. And I'll be able to totally talk to people, you know, completely fluently with, you know, maybe like week and a half, two weeks.
Like, you know, it's immersion, right? That's what happens. And that's just not the way it works.

Lee Burgess: No, it doesn't.

Alison Monahan: You know, for me, certainly, like, in the very beginning, there were some days that, like, I just didn't want to leave the house, I didn't want to talk to anyone, it was so frustrating to try to do even the most basic things, you know, ordering a coffee, you know, if you think about, you know, the conversation you had this morning with a barista in your coffee shop, you know, you didn't think twice about that, you probably don't even remember it, but when you're trying to do that in a different language, and they're asking you, like, well, do you want it for

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

here, or do you want it to go?
Like, what kind of milk do you want? How many shots do you want? Like how much is it? You're like, ah, I just want a, I just want a latte.

Lee Burgess: You're like pre latte. This is a very hard conversation to have. .

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You're just like, I can't function right now. Like, I just want what I want and I can't tell you.
And it's really frustrating. But you know, by the third or fourth or fifth time that you've had that sort of interaction. You know, now you're like, Oh, I want leche llevar you know, a cuanto cuesta, like I can look at the board and figure out, like, you know, now I understand, you know, the basic numbers, like 25, 30, 35 you know, if you gave me like 72 or whatever, I might have to think about that one, but you know, luckily most things cost about the same thing, particularly when you go to the equivalent of the farmer's market, everything's either 10 pesos, 20, 25, 30.
That's about it. So you know, if you get those basic ones down, you can start to be able to communicate. And then you kind of look back and you're like, why did I think this was so hard? Like, this is easy. Of course, they're just asking me whether I want, like, you know, regular milk or skim milk, whatever that would be called.
I just get regular because I honestly don't know what anyone else is called. At least I think I'm getting regular milk.

Lee Burgess: I mean, that's just part of the mystery of living abroad, you know?

Alison Monahan: You know, there definitely have been times in like a cafe or restaurant where I'm pretty sure I did not get what I thought I was ordering.
Sometimes, like, I don't really eat meat so that can be a little tricky. So I like to go to vegetarian restaurants, where if I don't quite get the exact thing I ordered, it's okay, I can still eat it.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I mean, you know, I think, like anything, it's just a lot harder, and it takes longer than you expect to learn something like a language.
And, you know, ultimately, law school is basically, at least in part, about learning a new language. I mean, any sort of schooling is, it's a whole universe. You know, I remember in architecture school, I had no background whatsoever in architecture. It was a completely new experience. And I just remember for the

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

first several months literally having no idea what the professor was talking about.
And they were talking in English, you know, they were using words that ostensibly had meaning in the English language. But the meanings were, you know, it was like, they would say, you know, we'd have these whole conversations where it was about, like, designing the edge condition. And I'm like, I understand every one of those words, and I have no idea what you're talking about.
You know, it's the same thing in law school. It's like, you might look up a word or you might know the word. You know, like consideration, like, okay, you know what consideration means not in contracts. And yeah, I think just getting comfortable with that idea that you're not going to understand a lot of stuff for a while, but you know, by the fourth or fifth time you hear something is going to start to make a lot more sense.

Lee Burgess: And I think the other thing, though, that law students really need to own about the learning process and the realities of practicing law is that although you may become comfortable with the legal terminology or the terms of art, you'll hear that term thrown around in law school a lot then you go practice law and then you may have to learn a whole new language of an individual industry.
You know, if you, if you're doing litigation and representing architects, you're gonna need to know all of that architecture terminology because. that's what your clients are going to talk about, and then it may be what issue is in the case.
And so, you know, when one of the things about learning that I think you have to really be comfortable with is that you're always going to be placed in these situations where you do not know what you're doing over and over and over.

Alison Monahan: Absolutely. And I think, you know, ultimately you're the one who's responsible for learning this. You know, even, I mean, I'm sure you had the same experience working. In different jobs, but you know, every time that you were assigned to a case, there might be someone to kind of give you the download on like, oh, like here's the basic background on what we're dealing with.
But that was it. You know, you had to figure out the law. A lot of cases, you know, you had to figure out, like you're saying the background environment. I mean, that's the thing about law is that all kinds of different people get into legal disputes. about all kinds of things. And you know, there's no way that anyone who's trained as a lawyer is going to necessarily know the background of all these industries that you end up working in..

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

I think ultimately that's one of the things that hopefully people take away from law school is this ability to learn things and to learn pretty deeply and quickly.

Lee Burgess: And to be comfortable with learning, you know, and to accept that you don't know. You know, the specifics of whatever you need, but you can go learn it. And I think that that's really the powerful thing. You know, we were reading an interesting article this morning on a practical wedding, which, believe it or not, if you do not follow a practical wedding, has a lot of stuff about it that has nothing to do with wedding planning, which is fantastic.
But it's a blog. It's based out of the Bay Area. And they do a lot of writing about entrepreneurship, about owning small businesses, and I think they call it pink businesses, but specifically women owned businesses. And some of their writing on entrepreneurship, I think, is some of the best that we see on the web.

Alison Monahan: Oh, I agree. I always circulate it, and then I'm always like, people probably think this is really weird. I'm sitting around links to a wedding website.

Lee Burgess: No, but I became obsessed with the practical wedding when I was planning my wedding five years ago. And since then, it's just really blossomed into this amazing resource.
I mean, we've seen Meg Keane who runs a practical wedding speak at events. And she's phenomenal. She writes about motherhood and all this stuff. So if you, anyway, check it out, we'll link to it in the show notes, because that's how obsessed we are. And we really want to have like, coffee with her, and just.

Alison Monahan: Oh, and in fact, the first time you and I ever met for coffee, I remember you telling me about the site and you're like, I think this is really weird. Like, it's not just about weddings, I think you would really relate to it, and I was like, oh, check it out, and I was like, this site is the best thing on the internet.

Lee Burgess: I know, and we really want to become good friends with Ben Keene, so if you're listening, I think she's actually married to an attorney. We would love to hang out. So.

Alison Monahan: We're such fangirls. But it is really a great site. It's a really great article, and the article that you're talking about I think is a really good one.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, but the article is really interesting. It was talking about, you know, things you need to know before starting your own business. And one of the last points she made in the article was that, it actually wasn't written by Meg, it was written

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

by somebody else. But she was talking about how you just have to like, you can learn anything you need to know to run a business through Google.

Alison Monahan: When I was even still at my law firm job thinking like, Oh, maybe I'm going to start a business or do something or write a book or something, and I realized I knew nothing about marketing. And so I actually paid for a course online from Ramit Sethi and was like, okay, you know, this may, this may, it's not entirely on point necessarily for what I want to be doing, but this is someone who knows this area, knows how to market things, knows how to deal with like the internet and things like that. And you just learn this stuff. I mean, same thing with Copyblogger, which is run by an ex attorney. You know, that was a huge sort of educational resource when I was starting a website and had no idea of like content marketing? What's that? You know, so there are, you know, in this point, I feel like there's almost, I mean, can you think of anything that you couldn't possibly learn on the internet at this point?

Lee Burgess: I know. Well, I just got an email about cooking classes online, yoga classes. We've, we've been seeing that now you can learn how to do yoga by watching these online.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's like a thing in the last week.

Lee Burgess: Uh huh. And yeah, it's amazing. I mean, even when we decided to start this podcast, I mean, let's be honest, we didn't know this was a thing.

Alison Monahan: We don't know anything about doing a podcast.

Lee Burgess: Right. I mean, you know, we run a business, You know, a lot of law tutors and bar exam tutors.
But, you know, we went and figured it out. Well, let's give Alison credit. Alison really went and figured it out.

Alison Monahan: Well, let's also give credit. We asked our friend who we should work with, and thank you, Sean, for editing our podcast.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. But but we still, like, you know, we read resources. We're like, tips on podcasting.
How does it work to use iTunes? It's kind of like, that information is out there, but you have to be willing to go learn it. And I think You know, not only does law school really teach you how to become an excellent student, you want to see that skill of being an excellent student as something that you can take with you

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

and apply to whatever you do.
Because I think it just, life is constantly like that. I mean, I have a new baby. I don't know anything about kids.

Alison Monahan: It's kind of amazing that they just let you take them home.

Lee Burgess: Yeah.

Alison Monahan: Just have, I mean, you didn't even have them in the hospital. You could just be like, here's your kid.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. Have a great day. Bye. We'll check on you tomorrow. And it's like,

Alison Monahan: I don't know anything about keeping this infant child alive. Is there a class on this?

Lee Burgess: I know. I did take a class. It was four hours. Four hours.

Alison Monahan: Wow. Four hours for keeping your child alive for the rest of his life.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. Yeah. So, and it was funny because everyone told me like, don't worry so much about reading about pregnancy and childbirth.
Read about how to learn how to take care of an infant. But you get so obsessed with the birth, which is important to really be prepared for. But you know, my labor and delivery lasted 12 hours, and raising my son has lasted longer than that. I needed many more skills.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, no, it's so fascinating. I mean, I feel like there's just so much information out there and, you know, this sort of struggle to find the right information, and then, I mean, I guess the first part of the struggle, at least for me, is to sort of even acknowledge that you actually don't know how to do something, or you don't know something.
And then it's sort of about getting how, you know, how I suppose learning is like a whole process. You've got to acknowledge that you don't know something and then you have to sort of figure out, well, what's going to help me learn this particular skill. And for me, if it's something physical, I typically hire someone, you know, I will hire, I'll take a ski lesson if I want to get better at skiing, or I'll have a boxing trainer if I want to get better at boxing, because I'm not a person who's really particularly good at physical stuff, naturally.
You know, so I really need someone there correcting me and giving me that hands on stuff. But you know, if it's something I mean, most information, for

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

example, you know, I learn best from reading. But I think You know, you've got to sort of get to that point of saying, I don't know how to do this. I need help to figure it out and then really getting uncomfortable.
And I think that's the part that people don't want to do.

Lee Burgess: Oh, for sure. I mean, you know, and I think that when you're uncomfortable is when the magic happens and you have to be kind of vulnerable. Like I went to the bookstore not too far from my house because I still do love doing research by looking at books, and I was trying to solve a child care problem by sitting on the floor.
I probably looked like the crazy mama. I'm sitting on the floor of the like, how to care for your baby section, and I had a stack of books, probably like a foot high, and I am flipping through them to decide which of them I believe are the most reputable that I'm going to purchase and take home and read one right after the other, because, really, what problem can't you solve through reading and learning?
And, as I take my, you know, four books that I decided to buy up to the register, the woman's like, You know, made some offhand comment about how kind of crazy I was, and I was like, I'm pretty sure in there is a solution to my problems. Like, just let me buy the books, you know?

Alison Monahan: I'm going to find it.

Lee Burgess: I'm going to find it.
But I think with being uncomfortable, there's a vulnerability to it. You know, there's a vulnerability to saying, I don't know what's going on. I have to spend time researching. I might research the wrong things. I might research things that I don't agree with. It might challenge my assumptions, but you do it anyway because that's where the learning magic happens.
And, you know, Alison wanted to work on her Spanish, so she dropped herself in Mexico City.

Alison Monahan: I pretty much have to work on my Spanish.

Lee Burgess: Right, so you have to work on your Spanish. And And, you know, at plenty of points, she's been uncomfortable. In college, I did a study abroad in Spain. It was a similar thing.
You know, everything was hard. I remember filling out paperwork to get a bus pass. It took hours because I couldn't, I had to like look up what all the words were on the form and I had a whole new appreciation for what people go

through when they relocate to a new country and try and fill out forms in English.
But you know, Instead of throwing away the form, my friends and I just sat there and like fought through it.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, see now that would actually be a lot easier because you can take a picture of it and Google Translate will translate it for you.

Lee Burgess: Well, this was pre Google Translate. This is still standing on the side of the, like, the street with the payphone because I'm that old now.
We've, I mean, we had like, there were no internet cafes, really. I guess there were some, but not very many. So, you know, I do think that being okay with being uncomfortable is where the magic happens, and that's really where the learning happens. And so applying this idea to law school, you know, when we work with law students, so often they want to do studying, whatever they decide that studying is, as easy as possible.
You know, so it's like, oh, well, I'm going to read these outlines. And it's like, that's great. That's probably not going to work.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, like, that's a great first step. Now, can you please, like, rephrase that into your own words and then try applying it? It's like, oh, well, I think I'm going to read this other outline.

Lee Burgess: Right, and it's like, oh, can you, yeah, regurgitate that information? Could you write down the rule statements that were in that outline? Could you explain to me what this law even means? Could you make up a fact pattern that this law would apply to? And then people start to get really nervous, and then they're like, well, no, and then our response is typically, then you don't know it.
And that's fine, but you know, you got to come at it from this growth mindset, going back to one of our first episodes and say, you know, I can learn this, but it's going to take some work. And it's going to take some creativity to figure out how I can do that. And I'm going to fall down. And it's going to be ok.

Alison Monahan: I think that, you know, that's the sort of Malcolm Gladwell, 10, 000 hour idea is that No one gets to be at the very top of any field without putting in the time and effort. And like, sure, of course, you've got to probably have some natural proclivity or ability, you know, to be a Broadway singer or to be an NBA player. But the people who are the best at those things also work incredibly hard. And, you know, he's got studies showing that, for example, with violinists, you know, the difference between being a concert caliber violinist and someone who ends

up teaching lessons in their neighborhood is actually pretty small.
And what they see is, you know, it's an extra half hour a day or an extra 45 minutes a day of really focused practice over the course of an extremely long time. And that's really what separates people. You know, so I think that has a lot of applicability to law school where everyone's smart, you know, you don't get into law school unless you've done pretty well in your previous education and you did well on the LSAT, and so, you know, in large part what really separates people is how much they're studying, how effectively they're studying, and really how hard they're working, and it's a craft it's not something that, you know, certainly some people are probably naturally better Or not even naturally better.
You know, they've gotten through whatever experiences they've had thus far. They are more accomplished at thinking logically or making an argument. But those people are not necessarily going to end up at the top of the class either. It's really about putting in that focused learning. And the time that you need and, and to acknowledge these challenges and really, you know, accept them with that growth mindset.

Lee Burgess: And I think it's important to kind of take some time if you find yourself feeling like I shouldn't have to work this hard or I shouldn't have to do this and to think about the people that you know who are truly extraordinary in what they do, because they are not becoming extraordinary by watching hours of Netflix TV. Like now I'm not saying that hours of Netflix TV doesn't have value periodically.

Alison Monahan: Sure, everybody needs a break.

Lee Burgess: Everybody needs a break. But you know, is that gonna get you to your goal? Probably not, you know, and you should think about the people who are truly extraordinary. The musicians, the business people, the lawyers that you know that are truly extraordinary.
You know, the seriousness that they take their, with the seriousness of which they approach their craft is something that I find truly admirable, and I have friends the Broadway singer example comes from the fact that I used to do a lot of music, and I have friends now who perform on Broadway, which is always pretty incredible to me when I think about that, but you know, some of these people I used to perform with, you know, when we were kids growing up in high school and college, and they're, you know, I still think about how we used to prepare for performances in high school, you know, and when one of those friends was performing with the San Francisco Symphony a couple summers ago, I, he had a performance that day and I was like, oh, but your performance isn't

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

until the evening. Like, don't you wanna just come over and have brunch? And he goes, well, I mean I can, but I have to, you know, warm up for an hour plus or whatever, and then I've got to eat these certain things and then I've got to like get to the symphony and to prepare. And it was just really struck me like, oh, that's right. We don't just roll in.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, he's not just like, oh yeah, I'll totally hang out all day. Then show up like 10 minutes early and get to work.

Lee Burgess: Right. And like have a few mimosas and then go sing in front of the symphony. And it just struck me how, you know, it was a great reminder that. Even somebody who is so accomplished, you know, that he is brought in to perform with different symphonies all over the country, he still has to stay really on his game and be very, very focused.
And so anytime you don't feel like you should have to, I think you need to remember that to be extraordinary, you have to work very hard at it. Everybody does.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. You don't just get to like roll in and be like, okay, cool. I mean, you can do that, but you're probably not going to maintain that level of performance for very long.

Lee Burgess: No, and I think there's always the urban myth, right, of the law student who doesn't do any work,

Alison Monahan: Right the unicorn. The unicorn who smokes pot all day and just reads like an outline right before the exam and does really awesome.

Lee Burgess: Right.

Alison Monahan: I mean. There may be those people.

Lee Burgess: Right, and if that's true for them, great job.
More power to you. But that's not the reality for most people, and that's okay.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, the reality is there's just a lot of work to do in law school even, and you know, most people are very smart, and most people are pretty hardworking, so, you know, it's just a whole, it's a different caliber.
It's like, you know, your friend probably could have rolled in with a couple of mimosas to perform at a high school, but probably not in front of the symphony.

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

Lee Burgess: Exactly, exactly. Yeah. So, you know, I think this idea, especially of being comfortable with failure or stumbling blocks, you know, what I was talking about my kid being totally good falling down all the time is something that we think a lot of people refuse to talk about, but some people out there are talking about it.
And Alison, weren't you just reading the other day from Brené Brown, who, if you don't know who she is, she's one of our favorite scholar authors. We just got to see her speak earlier this year. Yeah, she's great. She's amazing.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, so she's got a new book coming out, and I was reading a sort of excerpt from it, and she had something really interesting.
I mean, Brené studies shame, particularly and so, a lot of what she talks about is shame and learning, and I think this is relevant to law school, because Lee and I both definitely had these sort of, experiences where you feel so embarrassed or you feel so ashamed of something you said in school, but Brené did a study and here's what she said.
"One reason that I'm confident that shame exists in schools, is simply because 85 percent of the men and women we interviewed for the shame research could recall a school incident from their childhood that was so shaming that it changed how they thought of themselves as learners."
And I think this is really applicable to law school because, you know, you're used to sort of thinking of yourself as a high achieving, intelligent person, and then you show up to law school and, you know, you are going to have a bad day in class, and that can feel really shaming, and it can be so So powerful and so unpleasant that you, you stop speaking literally in class.
I know for me, I had an incident in my civil procedure class where I raised my hand and I said something and it was a hundred percent off base. And the professor just kind of looked at me and didn't really even say anything other than, yeah, I don't really think that's what we're going for and kind of moved on.

And, you know, I, I was so horrified by this that I didn't talk for weeks afterwards in any of my classes. The irony here is I actually ended up TAing that same class the next year. You know, so I think that shows you there's no necessarily link between what you say in class and how you do on the exam, but also just, you know, I can still feel like even talking about the experience, I feel that pit of my stomach of like, oh, so horrible.

Lee Burgess: Yeah. And I mean, I can say even back from my childhood when I was in third grade, I was in a group where if you, I don't know, our elementary school, you

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

would sit and had like a reading group, you know, and you read from the different books at the different levels. And there was one other girl in my reading group who would mock me and make comments while I read.
She wasn't the nicest person at that age.

Alison Monahan: That's really great.

Lee Burgess: It was really great. And. And so I was a pretty sensitive little kid, and so I started to get really nervous about it. And so I came home one day and looked at my mother, who's a lawyer, and said, I've decided I don't want to read anymore. I was in third grade.
And my mom was like, I'm sorry? Excuse me? And I was like, yeah, I don't like reading. So as you can imagine, my poor mom had a bit of I'm a little bit of a panic attack about that. And so she was a child psychology major, so she thought that I might have had a learning disability. You know, there was a reason why, like, reading had become too hard.
So she took me to like, an education expert in our town, and I met with the education expert, and we read together, you know, because she thought I might be dyslexic or something might be going on. And after the meeting, I actually remember standing in the meeting and watching them talk over my head.
And she said, Lee has nothing wrong with her reading, but when she doesn't know words, she makes up words that sound like they might fit in the sentence because she doesn't want to be wrong.

Alison Monahan: That's awesome. It's very creative.

Lee Burgess: It was very creative. And so she said the problem is she just doesn't want to be called out for being wrong.
And you know, I think it's interesting because I think I don't like to be wrong now. I mean, I'll be honest, I don't like to fail at things. But it was an interesting, like, point, moment in my childhood where I, you know, in third grade I had realized, like, I don't want to be called out for not knowing what I'm doing, so I'm going to cover it up as best as I can.
And so, you know, learning how to sound out the words and figure it out.

Alison Monahan: I was actually reading for a book club here the David Sedaris book, Me Talk Pretty One Day, and he has a funny story from childhood about how he had a lisp, and so they put him in speech therapy, and his solution was just to avoid saying words that had an S in them. So I think it's a pretty common thing to do.

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

Yeah. I mean, certainly, you know, I'll like try to steer the conversation in Spanish in directions that like maybe I have some vocabulary for.

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I know, it's so true.

Alison Monahan: Which is not a whole lot of topics at this point.

Lee Burgess: That's right, yeah. So, you know, it's interesting, and I have this thing I had the same, a terrible classroom experience in my criminal law class where I felt like a complete, you know, idiot and I thought my relationship was ruined with my criminal law professor forever because I didn't know what I was talking about and, you know, we to know each other much better.
He became a mentor of mine, and once I asked him about, you know, how poorly he thought of me because I felt like I'd made a complete idiot of myself in class, and he had no idea what I was talking about.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, of course, because him it's just like one day out of class. Oh, another student didn't know what they were talking about.
Whoops.

Lee Burgess: So, you know, we are our worst critics about this kind of stuff, and I think if we can go back to thinking about, you know, what does a one year old feel like when he doesn't know how to walk up a steep hill And then when he falls down,

Alison Monahan: He's just standing at the bottom and he's like, well, I'll never be able to do that. So I may as well just stop. Mom will just carry me up.

Lee Burgess: And I'm like, walk up the hill. You're heavy. Like, I don't want to push you up the hill. But but you know, he tried it until he got tired and he actually made it up like a good third of this pretty big hill.

Alison Monahan: It's impressive because I can barely walk up that hill.

Lee Burgess: Oh, I know. It's brutal. I know.

Alison Monahan: It's brutal. Yeah. I used to live in that neighborhood. I had to move. I moved to the mission where it's flat. I was like, I can't deal with these hills.

Lee Burgess: Exactly. So. It was just impressive to me where he's like, well, I might not be able to walk the whole hill, but I can walk until I get too tired.

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

Alison Monahan: Yeah, and I think that sense of humor and lightness and sort of playfulness, where it's just like, oh, it's a hill, it's an obstacle, like, let me see what I can do. You know, I think that's a great way to approach learning, whatever you're learning. And, you know, I think the people who end up being most successful in law school are typically the people who approach the law with this kind of almost like game like aspect, like it's playful. It's almost You know, how far can you stretch this argument or that argument?
And they're not, you know, they're not hung up on being right all the time. It's more, it's, there's just a sense of playfulness about the whole thing.

Lee Burgess: And being able to laugh at yourself. I'm sure that you have said plenty of laughable things in Spanish.

Alison Monahan: Oh my god, I don't even know what they are half the time, but sometimes people, sometimes people do point them out to me and they're like, do you know what you just said?
I'm like, nope. Well, why don't you tell me?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, so, you know, if you're listening to this and you're thinking about, you know, starting this new journey at law school you know, Alison, what are some of the takeaways that you think we can give to people so they feel like they have a better perspective on learning?

Alison Monahan: Well, I think this idea of really paying attention to your self talk, and paying attention to your feelings around learning at different points and just really being aware can be very helpful. So, you know, whenever I would, like, screw something up in class, which, you know, happened not infrequently. There, of course, was that moment of like, you know, your face is flushed and you're embarrassed, but I would literally say to myself, maybe after class or at the time, I'm glad that I did that now so that I understand this before I get to the final. It's better for me to have made this mistake today than on the final. Yeah, like something like that. It can sound cheesy. But it actually, it's helpful. Like it reminds you that this is a process and it's a journey. I mean, how about you? What do you have to say?

Lee Burgess: Yeah, I mean, I think that one of the main things is going back to, I mean, I hate to be a broken record about this, but going back to this idea of mindset, you know, this stuff is going to happen.
You're going to stumble. You're learning something new. You're being put in an

Episode 6: Lessons Learned About Learning

environment that's likely to be challenging, you're there voluntarily. You're not being, like, held, you know, against your will.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, you can make bail if you need to.

Lee Burgess: You can make bail if you need to. But when these things happen, you have to check your mindset.
Remember, you know, from our talk on mindset, you can change your mindset at any time. So if this negative talk and self talk comes up, you have the ability to change the dialogue and to talk to yourself with kindness. You know, something that's We will talk about later in the podcast is the importance of like mindfulness and what our thoughts are on how some of this mindfulness work can apply to the legal profession.
But for me, one of the things that I constantly have to remind myself is to be kind to myself when I am imperfect because I do like to be well, do well at things.

Alison Monahan: Right. And Brené actually has a great book called The Gifts of Imperfection that I think is really powerful. I know a bunch of my lawyer friends have read it and really enjoyed it.
So, you know, if you struggle with this kind of idea of needing to be perfect, I think we can put this in the show notes. It's a fantastic book, but with that, unfortunately, we are out of time. Thanks so much for tuning in. We'll see you on the next episode where we're going to talk about some strategies for managing your time and your life.
If you enjoyed this episode, please take a second to leave us a review. We would really appreciate it. And if you have any questions or comments, again, don't hesitate to reach out. You can find us on our website, LawSchoolToolbox.com. Or you can email Alison or Lee @LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks so much for listening. We'll talk soon.