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Why Wreck-It Ralph Went to Law School

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Matter commented on: The Ontario Bar Association's marketing campaign, [Why I went to Law School](#)

"I'm bad, and that's good. I will never be good, and that's not bad. There's no one I'd rather be than me." – Wreck-It Ralph

The Ontario Bar Association's marketing campaign, [Why I went to Law School](#), has attracted media attention (see National Post article [here](#) and Globe and Mail article [here](#)) as well as being cogently criticized by Jordan Furlong on SLAW back in February (see article [here](#)). I want to add my two cents to that conversation. What I say is informed by two things. First, in my role as Director of Admissions at the University of Calgary I have read some 2000 statements by law school applicants answering the very question posed by the OBA: "Why do you want to go to law school?" Second, as a law professor, and in particular as a law professor interested in regulation of things like lawyer civility, I have thought a lot about how the profession ought to respond to its oft-referenced "poor public image".

And here's what I think. I don't care why you went to law school (or, really, why you want to go). Maybe you want a financially secure future. Maybe you are attracted by the prestige of a profession. Maybe you know a lawyer – are related to one – and you think her job looks pretty good. Maybe you read *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a teenager. Maybe you saw *Legally Blonde*. Maybe it's something you perceive as a challenge, and you want to see if you can meet it. Maybe you have nothing better to do. Those are all reasons people have to go to law school.

But why you want to go to law school does not, in and of itself, matter very much. We ask the question for admissions because it is a good way of finding out something about an applicant and it may give us some indication of the kind of law student the applicant will be or the kind of lawyer the applicant will become. And that last question is the truly relevant one. It's not why you go to law school. It's what you do *after* you go to law school that matters. Are you a good lawyer? Do you serve the social function the profession has been given?

If you do – great!

Except...

If you do, then chances are you are part of the reason why lawyers have a poor public image.

Yes, there are things that lawyers do that they do not have to do which makes the public view them – and us – poorly. Some make a lot of money. Some lie to their clients. Some don't work very hard for their clients. Some steal money. Some even commit murder.

But if lawyers avoided all those things, if every lawyer achieved the highest professional excellence, the public would still not like us. Because being a zealous advocate within the bounds of the law means that, some lawyers, some of the time, will be professionally obligated to do things the public does not like. Some lawyers, some of the time, will act for people the public (correctly) assumes to have committed the factual and mental elements of the offence with which they are charged.

Some lawyers, some of the time, will point out the complexity in a situation that “everyone” knows is simply black and white (see New Yorker article on the Steubenville case [here](#)).

Some lawyers, some of the time, will present evidence to the court that they suspect is not truthful (the SCC just affirmed the legitimacy of this: *R v Youvarajah*, [2013 SCC 41](#)).

Some lawyers, some of the time, will help ensure the proper application of laws that do not achieve popular results, or even “just” ones.

The legal system exists (in part) to help us achieve a way of living together despite the fact that we are flawed and imperfect people who do not agree on the best way to live the short lives that we are given. In working within that system, as advocates, advisers and counselors, lawyers necessarily participate in those human and societal flaws and imperfections.

And what if lawyers did it? What if they achieved the public image and reputation that some in the profession are seeking? That will not be the day that we – as people and as a society – have achieved perfection. It will be the day when we as a profession have failed, because forgetting the necessary and important – even if unpopular – social function with which we have been tasked.

Wreck-It Ralph was the video game villain, and he ran away from his game because he was unpopular and lonely. But after a series of adventures, he discovered that his role as the villain was essential for the future and welfare of everyone in his game world. He had to be the bad guy, so that his world could continue. Lawyers are not villains, but the role they play is as essential, even if as unpopular, as Wreck-It Ralph’s was.

This comment was originally posted in Professor Woolley’s monthly column on [Slaw](#).

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