

Don't study law

Students across Singapore are currently considering university programmes in which they have been offered a place. They routinely seek advice from family and friends, as well as attend open houses and read material on official websites and social media. But what if they could give themselves advice? Letters of the Law is a student-led initiative that asks law graduates to write to their younger selves. In this letter, I write to my younger self at age 18, during the year I spent studying Chinese at the Beijing No. 2 Foreign Languages Institute before returning to start university in Australia.

Simon Chesterman

Dear Simon,

Don't study law.

I mean it. Law is hard. Law is rarely fulfilling. And there's a reason

people make jokes about lawyers having a chasm that separates their head from their heart.

You most certainly shouldn't study law just because you got the grades. A fistful of As could equally see you pursue politics or literature, business or science. Medicine maybe. (Ah, but you had to drop

chemistry, didn't you?) Remember the time you thought seriously about enrolling in veterinary science just because it had the highest cut-off? Don't. Do. It.

Don't study law for the money. You've met enough lawyers already who earn big salaries without having time to spend them; lawyers who hit a mid-life crisis at 35, with an eye to a heart attack by 50.

Also, don't study law because you hope to be powerful. Lawyers can have influence, yes, but it can be baleful as well as beneficent. Carl Schmitt was a law professor, after all.

And for heaven's sake don't study law because you think you will earn respect. See the earlier reference to lawyer jokes. (For example: What's the difference between a jellyfish and a lawyer? One's a spineless, poisonous blob. The other is a form of sea life.)

So, instead, study something in

which you are interested, about which you are passionate, and through which you think you can make a difference.

Really? You still think that might be law? You're even more stubborn than you are now.

Fine.

If you must study law, then do it because you want to understand how power in society is held to account. The rule of law stands between organised society and the rule of the jungle. One day, even as great a country as the United States may find that the rule of law is the only protection against a reality TV star who becomes its 45th President. (I know you haven't heard of reality TV yet – you aren't missing much.)

Study law because you love what it entails: doctrines that confront all the vagaries of human experience, theories seeking to uncover hidden forces that shape

those doctrines, the strategies and tactics of legal practice. Law in the books as well as law in action.

Language that proves on a daily basis that the pen is mightier than the sword because we as a community choose to believe it to be so. Then focus your research on the hardest of those cases, where rulers turn on the ruled, where the institutions of society break down, and the bonds of human civilisation are revealed to be at their weakest. Ethnic cleansing is another term that hasn't yet been invented, but it will be when genocide returns to Europe in a few years.

And, despite all this, keep on studying law. Research, teach, practise in the hope that doing so might make the world a little safer, a little more just. Remember that, even as a student, you can help in the Aboriginal Tutorial Assistance Scheme and by volunteering at the Fitzroy Legal Service. When you get

the chance, encourage more and more students to do pro bono work. (You might think it's an oxymoron to make pro bono work compulsory, but keep an open mind about that.)

Above all, never stop questioning why you chose law, and what the privilege of being offered such a choice now obliges you to do next.

Cheers,
Simon

p.s. The 4D numbers for May 10, 2017 will be 0563. Just saying.

• The writer is dean and professor at the National University of Singapore faculty of law. Letters of the Law is a student-led initiative that aims to promote positivity in the legal community. The website publishes letters written by law graduates to their younger selves, and can be found at www.lettersofthelaw.org.