goals and ensure that their work provides their students a thriving learning environment.

Clinical professors rightly, in my view, structure their client relationships in widely varying ways. Some take very few cases, focusing intently on skill-formation and perfecting the practice in an area of law. Others, including myself, take on a variety of matters, sometimes learning areas of law alongside our students. But for all academics engaged in clinical teaching, a close relationship with public interest communities—both legal practitioners and community advocates—is necessary to making thoughtful and intentional choices regarding what work to engage in and what relationship to have with social change movements. Likely due to my background as an activist, my guiding principle on how to make these choices is based on determining what I am well situated to do as an academic, and what I am poorly situated to do.

To be clear, I disagree with those who argue that there is or should be no difference between academia and the public interest. “Academic freedom,” and by that I mean time, financial resources, and flexibility, are all privileges that academics in clinical teaching enjoy that public interest communities rarely have. When I worked as a public defender, I had strict limitations on the type of work I could engage in. Nonprofit organizations are usually subject to approval by a board of directors for new litigation or forms of advocacy. Those organizations that fund their work partially or exclusively through grant funding also must adhere to limitations by the grant organization.

The time and financial resources that academics enjoy thus stand in contrast to that of public interest communities. For example, in a clinic case we worked on seeking a resentencing hearing for a person sentenced effectively to life without the possibility of parole as a juvenile, we staffed the matter with two attorneys and five students. For our typical immigration case, we staff two attorneys and anywhere from two to four students. Most criminal defense and immigration practitioners enjoy spending most of their time on the causes they serve. If mentorship is a cause that you serve, then clinical teaching might be for you. When I became a public defender, I quickly grew to believe that being one was only sustainable if public defense was a calling. In the past year I have grown to believe the same about teaching. At a time where being in the trenches of public interest work feels incredibly pressing, I am heartened by what is possible in academia when we work closely with public interest communities.

Hope Metcalf
Executive Director,
Schell Center for International Human Rights
Liman Director 2010–2014

This year was a doozy.

In the weeks following the election, life became a swirl of frantic planning, protests, surreal debates about the difference between “fascist” and “authoritarian.” I met for hours with students terrified for themselves and their families. I shuttled between addled and numb. Everything around me felt like it was on fire, and I was carrying a bucket. Well, a thimble, really. But a thimble nonetheless.

And so it went for the next six months. Until a summer intern stopped me on the street as I was running back to my office with my second iced coffee of the day and reading emails on my phone. “Do you have a minute?” Well, no. I don’t. Haven’t you been reading the papers?

He wanted to talk to me about a lecture I had just done on trauma and resilience. I recapped some of the big points. First, the ways that our bodies react to traumatic stress are more or less hard-wired, and, while useful in true emergencies—for example, fleeing a burning building—they can prove destructive over time. Second, remarkably, the act of empathy is not only a moral, but a physical exercise, in which the empathizer’s brain mirrors the response of the actor. Third, our bodies do not distinguish between “good” and“bad” forms of stress, and there are clamoring for. Without a close relationship, academics are missing out.

I highlight the difference between public interest lawyering and academia because I strongly believe teaching is not for everyone. I do not intend to romanticize academia. Lawyers work long hours and must have a source of energy that sustains them, and for many lawyers this source is their client relationships. Even clinical professors who have clients do not enjoy as direct a relationship as practitioners have with theirs.

Clinical professors must also love mentorship. Public interest practitioners enjoy spending most of their time on the causes they serve. If mentorship is a cause that you serve, then clinical teaching might be for you. When I became a public defender, I quickly grew to believe that being one was only sustainable if public defense was a calling. In the past year I have grown to believe the same about teaching. At a time where being in the trenches of public interest work feels incredibly pressing, I am heartened by what is possible in academia when we work closely with public interest communities.
is no more point in judging our own emotions than in judging your swollen toe after you stub it. And, finally, resilience is not a character trait, but a set of practices that can be learned and shared.

After patiently listening, what he really wanted to know was: “But can I really do this over a lifetime?”

Oh. Right. And as I stumbled to find an answer, I realized that, over the last six months, I had undone just about everything I had learned about trauma and resilience.

Every time I take my students on their first visit to a supermax prison, we talk about what a supermax is, how it functions, what it represents—but also how it feels.

How does it feel to be in a tiny, concrete, windowless space? When an unseen hand presses a button and the pneumatic locks close? When your client enters, flanked by two officers, his hands and feet shackled? When the officers chain his ankle to a steel loop on the floor? When, from another end of the unit, you suddenly hear shouting or smell pepper spray? How does your body react? Does your heart race? Where does your mind lie far beyond the reach of you or the law—how do you make that journey? Do you breathe the fresh air and admire the wide sky? Do you try to unhear what you have heard? Do you try to unsee what you have seen?

It took me more than a decade to ask myself these questions. Before then, like so many public interest lawyers and students, I choked down my own sadness and doubts. Sure, there were a few signs, like the time I fled the theatre during Slumdog Millionaire, which opens with a protracted torture scene. Or when our clinic celebrated with a group of clients who had fought and won their immigration cases, and, halfway through their speeches, I suddenly burst into tears. Not happy, quiet tears. Messy, gulping sobs.

So, with my students, I try to help them learn to identify and to accept the feelings—sometimes inchoate, sometimes acute—that accompany a trip to and from supermax. This can be challenging. After all, we are not directly in harm’s way. In a very real sense, we can leave.

Except that—if we are doing our jobs—we don’t leave. Or, at least, we must return.

This is not to equate our experiences with our clients’ experiences. That would be ridiculous. But it is to acknowledge a fact: to stand and fight alongside people who have experienced violence—in its many forms—is to be forever changed.

To witness—to truly see—what our clients experience, we cannot emerge whole. Psychology teaches us that one of the most profound and lasting effects of vicarious trauma is moral injury: the sense that basic principles stitching society together have ripped apart. To be a public interest lawyer—to align one’s life with people who are ignored, hated, disappeared—is to have a constant reminder about society’s darkest impulses.

Bryan Stevenson, when speaking of his decades in the fight for racial justice, often says “I am broken.” So am I.

But broken doesn’t mean broken down.

Over time, I have come to learn that we will grow in our broken places. The question is how. Will we grow inward, stooping under our own guilt and shame? Will we harden under layers of cynicism? Or will we stretch upwards and outwards?

There is an emerging field of research in “vicarious resilience,” which posits that just as our empathic responses mimic others’ pain, so, too, can we mirror others’ strength. And often, those best able to model resilience for us are our own clients. Even in desperate circumstances, people show remarkable resourcefulness. And purpose. And kindness. I just have to remember to lift my head up and look.

So this is what I wish I had said to the summer intern. Yes, you can do this. But you can’t do it alone.

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IN FOR THE LONG TERM: RESILIENCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

McGregor Smyth
Executive Director, New York Lawyers for the Public Interest
Liman Fellow 2003–2004

I’ve been thinking a lot about resilience lately. We live in a darkening time—it both motivates and enervates. We’ve been shocked by draconian changes in policy, unprecedented threats to our communities, and the venality and hostility revealed in so many of our fellow Americans. The explosion of hate, the Muslim ban, attacks on sanctuary cities, attempts to decimate healthcare for millions, active voter suppression, dismantling of environmental protections. Presidential disdain of people of color, immigrants, people with disabilities. Charlottesville.

But I draw hope from a remarkable year of resistance, resilience, and solidarity. Thousands of lawyers mobilizing at airports across the country after the first travel ban. Hundreds of thousands of Americans calling their elected representatives, often for the first time, to make their voices heard and beat back the cruel health care repeal effort. Over a million people protesting threats to progress at repeated actions across the country.

In this new normal, a panel at the Liman Colloquium asked what it means to be an entrepreneurial public interest lawyer. Indeed, our clients’ struggles for justice often require the most innovative solutions, weaving together organizing, policy advocacy, litigation, and comprehensive communications to