
[Small Law: Pick Myself Up](#)

Skills and Professional Development

Small Law columnist Jeff Wheeler reflects on 2020 and what he is doing to "Pick Himself Up" this year.

I didn't teach myself to make sourdough bread once we started working from home last March, though I hear many people did. I had a brief and spectacular run of success making my own pizza dough from scratch around that time, but that began pre-COVID, and then ended very suddenly and catastrophically for reasons I've yet to understand. I'll say this much — flour, water, yeast, salt, and oil, when carefully measured, decide they're going to become dough — or not. When unsuccessful, they become something very unpleasant and difficult to remove from whatever it touches.

It took me months to figure out what my "COVID project" would be. Then, as a birthday present to myself, I ventured out and bought a guitar, and set about teaching myself how to play it. I figured it was a way to "[Pick Myself Up.](#)"^[1] When I got to the store, my eye was caught by what turned out to be one of the most expensive ones in the showroom, hand-formed of mahogany in an ancient shop in rural Pennsylvania somewhere near where Mario Andretti grew up. It is a beautiful thing to look at, its tone is soul-stirring, and it even smells great. I rationalized that because (1) I fell in love with the thing on sight, and (2) made a substantial financial commitment upfront, I was already really committed to mastering this thing.

So, chords are hard. More specifically, strumming one chord and then strumming a different one after

that in less than, say, five seconds is hard for *me*. I know I'm not unique in that respect, though; I'm part of an online community of tens of thousands of players, and every day, someone there describes being stuck exactly where I am. The responses are invariably a blend of commiseration from the similarly situated, and encouragement from those who were once there but subsequently broke through. "Just stay with it, practice every day, and don't get discouraged," they'd say. "Whatever you do, don't give up." Also, many of these people seem to derive as much joy in buying additional guitars as they do playing the ones they have, but I'll ponder what that's all about some other time.

I found myself thinking about this recently, in the course of considering what my work priorities would be for the year ahead. This is probably because, immediately beforehand, I'd been thinking about my priorities for 2020, and how well those went (cue "[sad trombone](#)" sound effect). More specifically, I was thinking about all the things that went off the rails when COVID hit, and how the months that followed had so little in common with the plans I'd made for them, both professionally and personally. In 2020, I meant to make real progress in improving and refining the way one of our business units manages its many contracts. I wanted to get more familiar with the ways technology we already have could be leveraged to improve the process, and to learn more about the current state of the art with regard to what artificial intelligence and other innovations could mean for us. Those were just the first of many steps I saw myself taking.

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It didn't work out that way. I ended up doing almost none of those things. It's not that I wasn't busy; far from it. I'm amazed by all the people who report what they're up to with the time not spent commuting; I'm not surprised that none of these people work in a small law department. Approximately half of our workforce is considered "essential" medical personnel by the jurisdictions in which we operate, so I dove into the deep end on what that means at a national, regional, and local level. So much in our industry changed, and continues to, in response to what's happened — and so my plate has remained full and varied.

It's tempting to write the year off as an anomaly with regard to goals from the "before times," and line them back up for another start when conditions permit. That'd be a big mistake, though, because nothing is the same as it was this time last year. I still work with the same great team, our organizational mission hasn't wavered, and the day-to-day experience is in many ways what it's always been. Even so, I know more about the organization, and about how it grew and adapted in the intervening months. We all learned new ways to get things done. Many of us have relationships that have strengthened and deepened because of these shared experiences. Also, "conditions" are never going to "permit" — conditions just *are*. My objectives from last year can certainly inform my priorities for the year ahead, but it's so much more than just picking up where I left off.

As for the guitar, though, I just need to keep drilling on those G, C, and D chords until they click. Well, either that or buy an electric one; I heard that helps, too.

[1] As sung by Peter Tosh in a concert at the Tampa Jai-Alai Fronton, attended by teen-age me.

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