



Letter to the younger
Nomisa Mbere



WEBBER WENTZEL

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Dear Nomisa

You would be delighted if you could see now how exciting your life will turn out to be. At this stage, you don't really know what you want to do. Medicine? Computer science? Chemical engineering?

You've always been someone to try different things - ballet, tennis, cross-country running, horse-riding. You've played in teams, where your individual contribution to that team really mattered. But you've always been more of an observer, watching what is going on, rather than drawing your identity from a group.

Most young people feel pressure to "fit in" with the crowd, but it is actually far more important not to court popularity or worry about what other people are doing. You have to make your own decisions and be authentic to yourself. Be adventurous – it will teach you far more about yourself than your peer group.

Once you realized your priorities, this is how your career unfolded.

You were accepted to study dentistry, which seemed like a good choice considering your father was a gynaecologist, and you worked as a dentist in Botswana for many years. But one day you looked at your father, who was still delivering babies at the age of 70, and thought: "do I really want to be still filling teeth at that age?" So you started to study law through Unisa and graduated with your LLB in 2005.

Still, it was only when you were 45 that you realised you had reached the turning point. You either had to take the leap into a new career or stay a dentist for the rest of your life. So you moved to Johannesburg and were taken on as a candidate attorney at Webber Wentzel in 2012. A complete career U-turn.

You knew you couldn't limit yourself to one experience. In our short lives, there is a lot to take in. Let your soul fly, and trust in a higher being to help things work out. Friends and family will question your move, but it is more important for you to decide for yourself, because you have to live with those decisions. Once you have set out on your chosen path, your friends and family will help you, in many practical ways.

You have to do things with an open mind and let the journey unfold as it will. There's no need for a 20-year career plan because you will find that you change along the journey. Make your plans, do what you set out to do, and then make a new plan.

Starting out in law in your forties will demand a lot of humility. You are a junior, no matter how old you are. You don't know anything. Younger people will know better than you and will be your bosses. Law is very hierarchical. You have to put your ego aside when they put red lines across your document. Don't take it personally, ask what you did wrong.

Always remember there is a difference between being shamed and being corrected. If you know the difference, you know how to react when you are being shamed. Your self-confidence is important, don't let someone take that away from you. In these situations, assert yourself, but without anger.

In law, you are constantly questioning your own judgment, and if your goal is perfection you will be insecure about yourself. Meditation is helpful – you become kinder to yourself and find you are able to say: "this is just a mistake. Just carry on doing the best you can." Understand that you are on a journey and you will get better along the way.

Remember that mistakes are a way of learning. You will inevitably upset people and miss opportunities. But it is pointless to have regrets because you have no idea how things would have turned out if you had done differently. Just make the decision that seems best at that time.

Your resilience will come from having a greater personality in your life, whether it is God or Buddha or whatever strikes you as truth. Life is hard and there are times when it could have been very lonely for you, if there was no external energy to tap into. At the same time, don't be fixated about being religious. If there is a general purpose to being alive, it is not yet clear to me.

Don't strive to be a role model to others, or to set up a person as the perfect role model for you. No single person can fulfil that need. Rather look around you and identify the best aspects in the people you meet that you would like to aspire to. A mentor who is involved with you, who is a friendly listener, can be helpful, but remember that mentors are also wounded people, and the advice they give you may come with its own biases and bitterness. A sponsor is different. A sponsor in a legal firm gives you very targeted support, by assisting you to move to partnership level by teaching you law, giving you appropriate opportunities and putting you forward in front of the client. A sponsor will teach you the business of law, not merely how to draft a document.

Through life, the values you should be following are authenticity, individualism, interconnectedness and adventurousness. While nurturing your individuality, you need to connect with other people and build relationships. Don't take life too seriously, it is an adventure, and even the bad experiences are teaching you some valuable lessons, if you think about it. Be forgiving – it is more natural, and demands far less energy, than being a negative person who holds grudges.

What will carry you through life and beyond will be the self-confidence that comes from knowing you have lived your life with as much authenticity as you could, and have gone wherever your soul wanted to take you, trusting it would turn out OK. 🍀