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About the JMBzine Newsletter

This is the debut issue of a monthly newsletter I've created for my supporters and friends. I'll be sharing updates on my work, as well as excerpts from some of the writing I've done in the previous month issues I care about, including peace activism through the law, interfaith theology, culture and the arts. On a sidenote, I'm repurposing the domain name JMBzine.com to house this newsletter (transitioning my long-time blog to reside at www.jmb.mx), but you can also find this newsletter at <https://ko-fi.com/jmbranum>.



This newsletter is provided as an educational resource for friends and supporters of James M. Branum, attorney at law and interfaith peace activist. Information provided is general in nature and does not constitute particularized legal or other professional advice.

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My 50th Birthday: Reflections and Resolutions

[First published on my blog at JMB.mx](https://www.jmb.mx)

This week, I am passing a significant milestone in my life – my 50th birthday. Since this is my half-century mark, it feels appropriate to reflect on my life thus far and where it is going. I'm writing this mostly for my future self, but also to share some thoughts with those who are close to me.



Interestingly, I have another milestone this year — because in September I will also pass my 20th anniversary of being an attorney — which realistically speaking is likely the half-way mark of my legal career (or not — my father is still practicing law at age 76 with no signs of stopping), so it feels especially important to reflect on my professional life right now as well.

I will add that I've been on the journey of reflecting over the last few months, so this blog post is more of a summary of my thinking thus far.

What I am proud of

So, with those thoughts in mind, I'm going to begin this reflection by commenting on the parts of my life that **OVER**

I'm proud of. I've been married for 14-1/2 years (and also a stepdad to Ty for that same period). We don't have a perfect family (we have our share of arguments and conflicts), but I think we have a good family, because we try hard to support each other in our respective interests and areas of work. We also have a lot of common ground, especially in our collective commitment to lifelong learning (the three of us are very committed to our respective areas of study and teaching), spirituality, and our love of travel and experiencing other cultures. And of course, there is my extended family, which, despite occasional bumps in the road, is doing well right now too.

In my [legal work](#), I'm proud of the cases I've had the chance to do over the years. Most of it has been in military defense law, where I've had the chance to represent active-duty conscientious objectors, public war resisters, whistleblowers, and combat veterans who are struggling with PTSD. These have often been meaningful cases that reflect my values, so I'm deeply grateful to have had the chance to work with these clients.

Also, I have to mention my religious work, which has long been my second vocation. I've done this work in many different settings but today am happy that I've found my own quirky interfaith way of making it work, which includes leading a monthly farbrengen (spirited discussion session) for the [Spinoza Havurah](#), preaching once every month or so at a [progressive Mennonite Church](#), and doing a lot of other work (writing, podcasting, teaching) through the [Shalom V'Tzedek project](#). — And I get to do music sometimes too for religious communities, including playing harmonica (and more recently Irish tin whistle) and singing in choirs.

I do a fair amount of volunteer work, including with the [Military Law Task Force of the NLG](#) (and several other parts of the National Lawyers Guild), the [Leyenda Foundation](#), and my HOA board (which is mostly an excuse to get to know my neighbors and encourage neighborliness).

Finally, there are all of the other areas of joy in life, including [bicycling](#), playing golf, [creating art](#), gardening, etc. And of course, there are my friends – a delightful group of activists, workers, teachers, clergy members, musicians, and troublemakers.

What I'm not happy with

My life is not all sunshine and roses. First and foremost, I live in the USA during the rise of fascism. This has to be stated because the awareness that I have neighbors and

friends who are being targeted is always with me. There is no escape from this awareness.

Secondly, I've concluded that my professional life is not sustainable in its current configuration in two key areas.

First, military law work is incredibly stressful. Many of my clients are facing incredible challenges, not only due to their circumstances, but also as it relates to their mental health. I've learned through hard experience that there is a finite limit to how many stories of trauma I can hear, and that pushing past those boundaries is a bad idea. In the past, I judged myself for having these limits, but today I know that having limits is part of being human, and that I, as an autistic person, must accept that my limitations are not the same as those of others.

Secondly, my work has not been financially sustainable. Many of my clients have very limited financial resources, so I've asked for too little in fees (and sometimes not charging at all), which in the end has put stress on myself and my family, but also has at times led to feelings of resentment and frustration with the people I am trying to help. I certainly do not want money to be the most important thing in my law practice, but I can no longer pretend that it isn't an important factor either. And at age 50, I'm well aware that I need to earn more over the next 20 years if I want to be able to retire at 70.

What Changes I've been making over the last few months

Late in 2025, I started taking steps to make my professional life more sustainable. The first step was to limit my military law caseload to no more than 50% of my legal practice, which means I'm doing other areas of law that are less stressful and pay better. So far, that has meant doing [estate planning \(wills, trusts, powers of attorney, advanced healthcare directives, etc.\)](#), as well as serving as the in-house counsel for the worker-owned [Fertile Ground Cooperative here in Oklahoma City](#).

So far, I'm really enjoying these other areas of legal work. The clients are nice, and I enjoy helping them to feel more secure for their future. There are still social justice issues at stake (I especially enjoy working with African American families, helping them to keep more of their inherited wealth in their family for the next generation), but the stress is much lower. And these areas of law pay much better.

Looking for other sources of revenue

As I look into the future, one of the challenges I see ahead is that I also need to find a way to earn some income to help me be able to do the religious and activist work that I am involved with, which is why I'm kicking off a [fundraising campaign on the Ko-Fi platform](#). (FYI, Ko-Fi is similar to Patreon and other crowd-sourced funding campaigns, but

the fees are cheaper) in the hopes that friends who support the work I'm doing might be willing to make a small monthly donation.

To find out more details about the fundraising campaign (including the work that these donations will help fund and some of the perks that donors will receive), please visit: <https://ko-fi.com/jmbranum>.

Three Benefits that come when a religious community becomes open and affirming

First published on my blog at [JMB.mx](#)

The following message was shared at Joy Mennonite Church of Oklahoma City on Sunday, June 7, 2026. Please note that it was written for a very specific context (a progressive Mennonite church). My own personal theology is Humanistic and Pantheistic. [You can listen to the talk here](#) or below is a machine-generated written transcript, with a few links and notes added (marked with italics).

. . . So I am going to start with one Bible verse, or a short little passage, and then after that we're going to have – we'll move into some other stuff. So this is out of Genesis chapter one, and this is in verse... we're going to read verse 27

“God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image. God created them, male and female. God created them.” (*Reading from the Common English Bible*)

This passage I chose today because it speaks of divine diversity that God created all of human beings, and when we read here, actually, I recently heard a teaching that talked about this passage ([which I heard recently at the Oklahoma City Community Pride service](#)) that said that

we tend to think, in fact, some conservatives latch on this and say, see, there's only two genders, male and female, but in Hebrew, what really the way this is framed, and it's this grammatical structure where you say basically you're comparing two things, you're saying “I searched from high to low,” obviously you search in the middle too, high to low is showing these, so in this verse it's really speaking of the wholeness of diversity, and what I especially like about it, was the line, the part that said “in God's image, in the divine image, God created them, male and female, God created them,” which means, of course, maleness, femaleness, and everything in between. Again, using that grammatical structure of the extremes, all of that is in God's image, and which means also, if we miss part of that, we miss part of God's image.

Now, I wanted to preface today's remarks with that little verse, because I think it speaks to something important, and that is this month, of course, is Pride Month, and so I wonder, and I feel a lot of pride about Pride here at Joy, because we've been – we were through a struggle to come to the place of being an open and affirming church, and so I'm going to, since I initially was going to go into some history, I won't, because y'all are all y'all are old timers, so I'm not going to do that. What I am going to say, though, was it was a struggle. It took time, it took a lot of conversation, it took a lot of challenges, and one of the challenges that came up through that, was the issue of: what will we lose if we open the doors more fully, and especially what will we lose if we come out of the closet about being welcoming to LGBT plus people? What will we lose?

And I hate to admit it, but there were that there was some things that we lost, not so much our little congregation, but [the broader Mennonite Church USA did lose many people](#). Many people have chosen with their feet to go



Joy Mennonite Church in Oklahoma City

elsewhere. Many congregations have left affirming conferences, many, and if you look at the numbers denominationally, MC USA numbers are much lower, and that's a real issue, and I know I've not talked to Ralph, the pain that he's felt about that. I remember talking to Moses back in the day about this, that was a very real thing. On the other hand, today I'd like to challenge us to say that if we only focus on the cost, we're going to miss seeing some incredible benefits and incredible gains that the church gained by welcoming and accepting LGBT plus people, and so today I want to share about three things, three incredible benefits that I think that this congregation, the broader Mennonite Church, and of course people of faith everywhere have gained by welcoming queer people into the community. By the way, I should mention one bit of terminology today. I'm going to use two terms interchangeably: LGBT plus, which means lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and plus is meaning all of the other people who have some kind of different sexual identity, gender identity, all of that is within that plus, and so it's intended as a, as an inclusive term. The problem, of course, is it still leaves people out. A lot of people are just there with the plus, and so that's that's kind of challenging.

So another word we use today is the word "queer," that is a complicated word, because once one time it was a very pejorative word. Today many LGBT plus people have reclaimed that word, and I'm going to use the word today because I think there is some real power in that word, and we'll get to in just a little bit about why I think that word is important, and why it is important, especially for cisgender heterosexual people.

So, what are the three benefits?

First of all, we gained tremendously from the people that are now with us, the people that previously were cast aside. In fact, I was thinking this morning, well, actually yesterday, getting ready for this about [Randy Spaulding](#). He was a Mennonite church minister and was also deeply involved in the process of the hymnals, many of the hymnals that we have today. In fact, I believe maybe the purple and green ones, I think he may have been involved with, but he also was involved in hymn writing. I looked into the new song book, one of his hymns was translated by him from German, but I know in some of the other song books he did several of them, and he was someone who was really a dynamic and important person in the church, but about a dozen or so years back, he came out of the closet. He came out to his congregation, and in the end, his congregation — and I may have the details wrong —

but my recollection was the congregation was in the end said, "Okay, we're okay with that. The conference was not, the denomination was not, and so Randy ended up leaving the Mennonite Church, getting his credentials elsewhere, continuing in ministry, but then the world changed. The Mennonite Church changed, and eventually he came back to the Mennonite Church, and is today credentialed through the Mennonite Church, and we have been so richly blessed by him.

But think about so many other people that the church has been benefited by having these voices, and also some of the people that we lost in the days of exclusion. I remember one friend that I had over the years, who she was for a brief while student at AMBS, but then she dropped out, and she told me the reason I dropped down is I knew it was going to be hard to make it as a female minister, but then I realized if I ever came out of the closet, it was over. There's no way to ever get hired anywhere. And so today that person's doing good things, but they're not in a ministry role, and they're not in the Mennonite Church, because they were excluded. And so I would argue today the first great benefit of being opening, of being welcoming, affirming to queer people is we are going to gain the talents, the gifts, the creativity that those people bring to the church, and we have, we have been missing them for a long time, and having them back is a really good thing. That's number one.

Number two, we gain, I think the church as a whole gains something from a queer perspective, and what I mean by queer perspective is a queer perspective is a way of turning things on its head, of questioning norms, of taking of turning everything on its head, and in fact, I've heard this word used in the Judaism Unbound podcast, which, by the way, is one of my favorite podcasts, I highly recommend it, whether you don't have to be Jewish to love this podcast, there's so much good stuff in it, but they have, in several episodes, have talked about this idea of queering Torah, the idea of taking Torah, Jewish teachings, and then turning it on its head, and the some of the commentators they've had on the podcast have talked about that this is not just something that people who have a queer identity related to sexual identity or gender identity was really what all of us can do when we turn things over, and we look at it from a different way. When we say, where am I in this text? Where are the people I care about in this text? In other words, you're changing it, you're grappling with it, you're playing with it in revolutionary ways.

We have, by having relationships with LGBT plus people, by them being a part of the church, by being a part of our lives, we gain from their example, what they have done, of questioning the most sacred norms of our society. You just see the anxiety people have about gender roles and what-not. LGBT plus people have taught us, so what, so what. People freak out, so what? What would come if I looked at things differently? What would come if I embraced what feels to be true at the deepest level, even if people disagree with me? I would argue that that this queer perspective is a very critically important thing.

I would go a step further to say, in a way, it goes back to our Mennonite DNA. At the earliest days of the Anabaptist movement, what were they doing? They were turning everything upside down. They were saying the state says we have to be part of the church . . . he state says.

What did the Anabaptists say? Nope, we'll do something different.

They said you have to have your babies baptized in the state church. to be part of, to be citizens of this state, and the Anabaptists said, "No, we're going to baptize adults because it's free choice, and we're going to do this knowing it's being seen as treason against the state. We're going to do it anyway."

That is a queer perspective on theology that is taking things on its head, and they're saying, yes, we know the standard wisdom is this, this, and this, but we've read the Bible for ourselves, we've heard from the Spirit, we know we're in a different place, and we're going to follow that path wherever it takes us. And so I would argue, in many ways, when the Mennonite church started to evolve in these issues, we were actually in some ways tapping into that old DNA, that old bit of our identity that said we are the people that question. We are the people that look at things from another perspective. And so we, I think, gain greatly by looking at the example of our queer brothers and sisters and letting them teach us, and for us to learn from their examples.

Finally, I think the third thing that we have gained from being an open and affirming church, which is, we have gained from the struggle itself.

What I mean by that is, if you look at the again, going back to the history, looking back to the early days of the Mennonite Anabaptist tradition, in many ways this tradition, they often talk about it being being watered by the seed of (of the blood of the) martyrs, that the church was, and it grew things that transformational things happened, but it was in part because they were being persecuted, because they are getting pushed back, and that's often when that happens, when we get that push back, and we have to reach down deep and find the courage to do the right thing, anyway, good things happen. And I would argue the Mennonite Church USA is a much, is might be a smaller denomination, but in many ways it is a more just denomination. It is a community that is rooted in better values because of the struggle. In other words, we, by going through the struggle, by going through the persecution, and again, in our case, it's minor stuff, but I would.. it's not intangible, it's not nonexistent. When we look at in Oklahoma, how many other Mennonite churches do we have to connect with? We have [Pilgrimage up in Tulsa](#), and that's about it. We don't have a lot of connections,. That was a cost we had to pay. On the other hand, through that struggle, through having to face that, I think it helped us to find out better who we are. It helped us as a community to be more ourselves.

And so those three things I want to leave us with, as, as to not only focus on the cost paid, but this Pride month to also think about what we have gained and where we are going, and how that this congregation is a better church because we have evolved in these ways, and that there will be other challenges ahead of us. There'll be other times we'll have to look at new things, things all over again. The good news is we can follow the example of the Queer community. We can keep queering our tradition, we can keep looking at things in other perspectives. So I'll leave that and we'll move into discussion time

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Looking back at a picture from 15 years ago

[First published on my blog at JMB.mx](#)

This picture popped up in my Facebook memories from 15 years ago, so here's a little remembrance I wrote about it:

15 years ago... the date of this picture is significant, as later that night I would drive overnight back home to Oklahoma City, most of the drive spent rehearsing what I planned to tell Becky when I got back to Oklahoma (that I was in love with her and wanted to pursue a relationship with her).

The next morning, I stumbled out of bed (not even showering first) and walked next door for a baby shower for my close friends' first baby and strangely enough I happened to mention on Facebook that I was going to be at said baby shower which Becky happened to see.

Becky ended up crashing the baby shower, after which we

went to Kamp's 1910 cafe to talk —and then Becky proceeded to tell me that she was in love with me and wanted to pursue a relationship with me!

We got engaged by November and were married on New Years Eve.

The picture of course brings back other memories as well, of all of my friends I made during my time as a frequent visitor/volunteer at the Under The Hood Cafe, a pro-soldier/anti-war coffeehouse. I'm thinking about the joyful moments of solidarity and triumph, but also sad moments, including hearing so many stories of trauma but also of the many ways that hurting people end up hurting other people, including friends and loved ones. In a lot of ways my pivot to being with Becky, was a pivot away from my "giving everything to the cause" (no matter the cost) and

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towards sustainability and joy.

I still struggle with these issues, of trying to find the balance between activism, family life and self-care, but I'm in a much better place today than I was 15 years ago.

One other thing I should mention — that baby is now an incredible freethinking teenager and his parents are two of our family's closest friends (who we even got to go to Alaska with last summer), Britney Hopkins and Zach Gleason.



My family and the Gleason-Hopkins Family!

Humanistic Torah – Episode #6 – Parshah Chukat

[First published at HumanisticTorah.org](https://www.humanistic-torah.org)

The following is a working transcript of the program, but please note that I may have made slight change of wording on the fly:



Welcome to the Humanistic Torah podcast, hosted by James M. Branum.

This is episode #6, recorded on June 18, 2026.

This program is brought to you by Shalom V'Tzedek, a program of Unbound Humanistic Jewish learning. Before I get into the heart of today's episode, I do want to share a couple of announcements.

First, this will be the first episode that I'm going to also sharing in video form as well as in audio. I'm doing this

mostly to try to reach a new audience via Youtube, and social media.

Secondly, I now am running a fundraiser via the Ko-Fi crowd sourced funding program, so if you could like to help me to put our more quality content, please go to <https://ko-fi.com/jmbranum> and either give a one-time donation or pledge to give on a monthly basis.

Speaking of those donors, I want to give a quick shout to those who gave in the last month including Elliott Ratzman, Paul Walker, Bill & Ty Vaughan, and also our newest monthly supporter Gabrielle! Thank you all so much!

So let's jump in and explore some Unbound Humanistic Torah—

In this episode, I'm going to share a D'var Torah message that I'm going to be sharing at the upcoming Shabbat gathering of the Spinoza Havurah, an online Humanistic Jewish community.

The text I'll be exploring is from Parshah Chukat, but more specifically from Numbers 19:1-13.

(READ [Numbers 19:1-13](#))

To our modern ears, this text sounds strange and weird, but also more than bit irrelevant. But . . . this text can make more sense if we use our power of imagination to do some time travel to the time that that this text came into its pre-

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sent form.

Tradition says that Moses wrote all but the final verses of the Five Books of The Torah, but modern Biblical scholarship says that the text as know it today likely came into being during the aftermath of the Babylonian captivity. This was a time of both mourning, but also creativity, when Jews had to reinvent our tradition to deal with the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. One of the key elements of this reinvention was writing, so that previous disparate traditions (both oral and written) came to be centralized. We don't know exactly how this happened, but the best arguments are that this happened around 450-350 BCE in the cosmopolitan Persian empire, where the stories and practices of not only the Persians, but also Greeks, Babylonians and many others were familiar to Jewish people.

During this time period, many of the rituals and practices depicted in the Torah were common modalities, practices that almost everyone did—including animal sacrifices, fasting, and cleansing rituals. These practices would not have been seen as weird or unusual, but rather completely normal. Judaism (as depicted in these books) didn't invent these traditions, but rather gave them new meanings and understandings—ones that I think were often more humane than those of their neighbors.

It is for this reason that I want us to shift our attention away from the minutiae of the ritual, and instead towards the purposes and meanings behind the rituals.

Numbers 19 tells about the method of creating special ashes that were used in cleansing rituals. A red (or possibly reddish brown) heifer was killed and its carcass was burnt. The ashes were then gathered and kept for future rituals. These ashes may have been used in other contexts, but we know for sure they were used to purify those who had been present during a death or who had encountered dead body, but also were used as part of the purification rituals after war, both of the booty taken but also of the warriors themselves (which we can read about in Numbers 31).

In both cases, I would argue that these purification rituals are about healing from trauma. The rituals involved a time of separation from the community which provided a kind of liminal (or in-between space), followed by a ritual of washing using this specially-prepared ash water.

Before I go on, I should mention that these kinds of rituals are also present in other world religions and traditions, not only in the other traditions of ancient Southwest Asia, but

also in other places—most notably in Indigenous American traditions, which often have very similar traditions of separation and then washing after certain kinds of traumatic experiences.

And this purpose is where I find the modern relevance in this text for us today. All of us will go through trauma in our lives, but thankfully we can follow the example of our ancestors. While we likely won't be sacrificing any animals, we can create liminal spaces and rituals after we go through trauma, which can help to bring healing.

Some of you may already know this, but my day job is working as a defense attorney in the US military legal system over the last 20 years. I've worked with many combat veterans who struggle with issues of PTSD and related issues. Thanks to their testimonies, I've learned that the hardest part of returning from war for many is reintegration back to civilian life—and I think there are elements of modern warfare that have made this problem more difficult, namely the way we bring our troops home.

As discussed by psychologist and author Jonathan Shay (and others)—during World War 2, troops coming home traveled together as units by boat. The crossing of the ocean from either the European or Pacific theater took several weeks by slow-moving troop transport ships, which served as a kind of liminal space—where the troops were no longer “in the war” but neither were they “home” yet. But in later wars (including Korea, Vietnam, Iraq—both times, and Afghanistan), troops more often came home by airlift, sometimes with their units but also often not. There was little if any transitional time with one's comrades, and hence the jolt of everyday civilian life was pretty hard.

I must wonder if a driving force behind the increase in PTSD rates among veterans might in part be tied to this lack of appropriate secular rituals of reintegration? And I have to wonder, if this ancient text might give us some confirmation of the necessity of having these rituals, not only for the combat veterans among us, but for all who deal with trauma?

So as we move into our discussion time, I would like to leave you with these questions:

1. What might liminal/in-between space after trauma look like for us today?
2. What ritual might be satisfying as a mark of concluding

post-trauma liminal space?

- 3. Is it important to us that these rituals be specifically Jewish in nature?
- 4. How can we help to make it easier for others to engage in healing practices?

If you would like to be part of a live discussion of this text,

please join the Spinoza Havurah's upcoming Shabbat service on June 20th at 9 am central (details can be found in the shownotes), or please share your thoughts on our discord server or on the facebook page for HumanisticTorah.org. — Finally, if you have any comments, questions, feedback, etc, please email me at shalomvtzedek@pronton.me.

Why I (a Bicentennial baby) have complicated feelings about patriotism, the flag, and the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence



First published on my blog at JMB.mx

I decide to write this blog post partly as a message to my future self (so I can remember what this moment was like), but also because I know others are feeling this tension, but might be nervous to express how they are feeling.

I was born in June 1976, only a month before the US Bicentennial, so I was brought up in a patriotic world. And I grew up in Oklahoma, in a context that was saturated in patriotic ideology. But today at age 50, I sadly see things very differently and in some ways I'm grieving this change.



I think it is time to unpack why I'm feeling grief at this moment.

A Patriotic Childhood

I grew up (from age 5 onwards) in [Newcastle, Oklahoma](#). In those days, it was a rural community, which only a few years before went through a population boom which was fueled by paranoid white people fleeing court-ordered public-school desegregation in Oklahoma City. To give an insight into the demographics of Newcastle, the population in 1990 (my Freshman year) of my town was 92% white, with the remainder being mostly Native Americans and Hispanics. — I recall having only two classmates who were African-American (one kid in 1st grade whose family moved the

next year, and one mixed race Black teen in the latter years of high school).

Religiously and politically the town was very conservative, with the dominant church being Baptist. Catholics were quite rare, and being publicly out as an atheist was unheard of (almost as unheard of as being out as LGBT+).

Also, I should mention that I was born in [1976, the year of the Bicentennial](#), and I collected both stamps and coins, so I of course tried to collect all of the special Bicentennial issues of [coinage](#) and [postage stamps](#), as well as some of the other [kitschy memorabilia from that time that was still commonly seen in garage sales](#) for the following two decades. I was very proud that I was born on that year, even dreaming that if I lived to be 100, that I would get to be there for the Tricentennial.



We of course said the pledge of allegiance at the start of our Elementary school days, but flag ceremonies were also common at most sporting events, civic gatherings and even some churches. I remember visiting the First Baptist Church's Vacation Bible School which had us say the pledge of allegiance every morning — but also my Church of Christ summer camp had us saying the pledge every



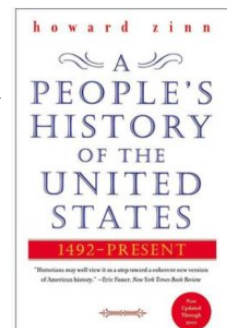
morning. And since I was in both the Marching Band and in Scouting, flag ceremonies were an important part of my life. We were taught to treat the flag with deep respect (never to joke about it, never to let it touch the ground, etc.), seeing it as a symbol of “our great nation.” And this message was hammered home through events at my school and in the community.

There were other flags in my life. There was of course the Oklahoma flag (which I still love, with its many symbols of peace) and of course the Boy Scout unit flags, but I also remember the Confederate flag being frequently present — not in official capacities like school events, but rather on bumper stickers, flying from the backs of pickup trucks and sometimes even on home flag poles. I don't recall it being talked about much, except that I remember hearing the flag represented “southern pride” and the [defense of State's Rights](#). And so, I believed what I was told.

Looking back on it now, I think I was duped thanks to my sub-par education about the US Civil War,^[1] my family heritage (I have multiple Confederate veteran ancestors, as well as some who fought for the North), but mostly because “state's rights” was a popular idea culturally in this town of 92% white people. We often heard it at the barber shop, sitting in the bleachers, talking after church — everywhere we heard about increasing “federal intrusions into our lives,” which tapped into the State's Rights myth.

Waking Up

I started questioning patriotism during my college years. The first seed of doubt was planted by a Church of Christ minister from Honduras who I worked with at a church camp. He asked us, “why are we saying a pledge of allegiance every morning? Isn't this excluding your brothers and sisters in Christ who aren't US citizens?” But I had more seeds of doubt planted through reading Howard Zinn's *The People's History of the United States*, but the final nail in the coffin of my nationalism was a religious awakening that came from re-reading the Bible's Four Gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) with fresh eyes. This eventually made me question the morality of war, capitalism, and nationalism, as these things directly conflicted with the teachings of Jesus, especially in his Sermon on the Mount.



And thankfully, it was during these years that I finally woke up to what the Confederate flag was really about: anti-Black hatred and slavery. I also had to acknowledge that even if one displayed the flag with the supposed “good” intent of supporting State's Rights, that this intent didn't change how one's neighbors would see the flag, as a symbol of ignorance at best, but more likely hatred.

I continued to grapple with these issues for several years, but eventually I realized that patriotism and nationalism were forms of idolatry, and that nationalism directly fueled hatred and violence. And so, I went the other direction, eventually finding my way to the progressive/radical wing of the Mennonite Church when I was in law school. It was during these years that I quit saying the pledge of allegiance. I also started affirming oaths (rather than swearing them), seeing these practices as ways to symbolically make clear, at least to myself, that my ultimate loyalty would never be to the nation-state.

The Question of National Civic Values

Despite my symbolic Mennonite gestures of disconnecting from the Empire, I also had to admit that I was still enmeshed in this system, partly because I was a lawyer (an “officer of the court,” meaning that I'm literally a part of third branch of government), but also because I was an activist who was seeking to bring reforms to the world. This meant that unless I changed my career and

went “off the grid” politically, I would always be part of the system.

And later, when I converted to Judaism,^[2] I came to grapple with other questions including: (1) how can I be loyal to the trans-national peoplehood of “Israel” without backing a nation-state called “Israel” whose policies towards the Palestinian people were cruel and inhumane (which felt like yet another form of toxic nationalism), and (2) are certain US American values (like democracy, due process of law, etc.) actually Jewish values, and as such should these values lead me to rethink my views on patriotism?

I’m still sorting out the first of those questions,^[3] but on the second question, I will say that the emphasis on positive civic engagement common in liberal forms of Judaism began to influence me, enough that I started to reconsider some of my previous iron-clad resolutions (i.e. I no longer objected to the “prayer for our nation” being a part of the service since it was aspirational in nature, rather than being overtly nationalistic). I also found other ways to speak and act more clearly in defense of US American institutions and values, including by working for the [US Census Bureau in 2020 during the COVID pandemic](#).

At the same time, my feelings about patriotic symbols have not changed. I still can’t look at the US flag without seeing it through the eyes of immigrants who are being hunted down like animals by ICE, or through the eyes of the Cuban people who are being starved by US sanctions, or through the eyes of the people of Gaza who know that the bombs dropped on their homes may have been dropped by the state of Israel, but that those weapons came from the USA. And it still bothers me that so many religious communities place this flag in their buildings, which feels like capitulation to idolatry. And it deeply troubles me that we are still worshipping the flag through flag salutes in school, sending the message to vulnerable children that worship of the state is our highest value.

USA250 — a time for mourning and Teshuvah, not celebration

The Fourth of July holiday is coming in just a few days, and it feels like this should be a time of collective mourning and reflection, in the hopes that it can lead us to Teshuvah.

[Teshuvah](#) is a Hebrew word which is often translated as “repentance.” It requires recognition and acknowledgment

תשובה

that one has done wrong, earnest efforts at making amends, and a commitment to not doing harm again. Teshuvah might begin with remorse and grief, but it always moves to the hope of restored relationships and the amelioration of harms. It is a practice that leads to hope.

I began this post by thinking about my future self, so I’m going to conclude in the same way. I want my future self to know that today I feel very uncertain about the future of this nation. I worry that our most cherished values and norms are dissolving and that the rise of fascism in this nation under Trump may have reached the point of no return. At the same time, I also believe in the power of humanity to change and the power of Teshuvah to heal. Despite my occasional desire to emigrate and be done with it, I haven’t yet given up hope. My hope is that our nation and its people can still do the hard work of Teshuvah, and that we all can take our own individual steps on this journey.

And one final thought, this holiday can also serve as a reminder of the limited nature of our perspective. The United States of America may or may not survive another 50 years, but there are many other nations in this world. For too long, we in the US have assumed that the world hinges on our nation surviving and thriving, but in reality, our ties to collective humanity transcend national boundary lines (even when despots build walls). Maybe we need to flip the idea of 4th of July as “Independence Day” on its head, remembering that maybe we need to declare our independence from nationalism itself?

^[1] This was a hard sentence to write, because one of my favorite teachers taught two of my years of high school history. I now know that he was wrong about the Civil War (most notably his incorrect statistics on the number of white people who were enslavers, but also his insistence that slavery was not the primary reason for the war), while at the same being very accurate and profound at other points in his teaching of US history.

^[2] The story of my conversion to Judaism is another complicated and long story. [Here is what I wrote back in 2014 about my decision to do this](#). I will only add for my Christian readers, that I still deeply value the ethical teachings of Jesus, even though I no longer see him as part of a trinitarian conception of God.

^[3] Today I tend to describe myself as a Non-Zionist or a Diasporist, but I will have to write about that subject on another occasion.

The use of AI by Military Law Practitioners: Dangers and Opportunities

A version of this article will appearing in the Summer 2026 Issue of [On Watch](#), the journal of the Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild.

Despite some reservations, I decided a few months ago to try using AI to complete a task in my military law practice. I gave the AI system the task of writing the first draft of a memorandum arguing to a military convening authority that it should accept an officer's request for a discharge in lieu of court-martial.

The results came back in just a few seconds, and at first glance, they looked good. The arguments were sound, the tone was appropriate, and the formatting perfectly fit the customary style used by this branch of the military. It briefly crossed my mind that AI might soon make the work of a military defense lawyer redundant.

But then I checked the sources . . . and that is when the AI's weaknesses became apparent. For the regulations, it failed to provide proper pinpoint citations (pointing to the exact spot in the regulations that needed to be cited), and when I asked it to provide these citations, it made them up (as I quickly discovered when I checked the AI's work). I also found that it couldn't do case law research well, as it made up a case to argue a needed point --- it was almost as if the AI knew I needed a case to make a certain argument, couldn't find a case that made the point, and so it just made one up.

I have since continued to experiment with AI systems and now believe these tools can have their place, but only if those using them exercise appropriate diligence, because the dangers of misuse are real. One example of these dangers can be found in the case of [STATE OF OKLAHOMA ex rel. OBA v. REEVES \(2026 OK 37 1\)](#), a case in which a lawyer received a public reprimand after citing five non-existent cases in two motions before a federal court, because he failed to check the cases provided by the AI program he was using. But other dangers are also present, including the risk that client confidentiality could be



breached if an attorney feeds sensitive client data into an AI program that uses it to train its model.

At the same time, generative AI systems are time savers, particularly for repetitive tasks such as properly formatting a motion to reflect the standards of practice in a given branch of the military or reviewing attorney-drafted documents to identify possible errors and weaknesses in arguments.

Considering these potential benefits and risks of the use of AI, here are some guidelines I recommend in the military law context:

1. Consider carefully what AI platform you plan to

use: There are many options available for generative AI, some that are designed specifically for attorneys, others that can be adapted for legal use. I currently use Lumo (a program from Proton, a Swiss-based company) for its end-to-end encryption, its default setting that doesn't allow the AI to train on user-submitted data, and the fact that the service isn't based in the US. Technology is constantly changing. It is worth spending time finding the right program for you.

2. Do not feed confidential client data to any AI plat-

form: AI models often use client-submitted data to train their algorithms, which means that any data submitted to such a program could later make it into other things said by the AI (breaching client confidentiality). For this reason, I recommend anonymizing all data provided to an AI system (including even those like Lumo that claim not to train on user-submitted data), for example, by replacing the client's name with "John Doe" and their duty station with "Fort No-where."

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3. Be very specific when giving AI instructions and be ready to ask follow-up questions:

The better AI platforms will create documents with appropriate formatting for each military branch, so be sure to specify the military branch. Also, if you get results from AI that aren't quite right, don't hesitate to ask AI to rewrite it based on the feedback you give it. And don't hesitate to ask the AI to provide counterarguments for the arguments it makes, which can help to highlight weaknesses in an argument. (For more discussion on how to ask AI tough questions, see [Bays, Julie "Cross-Examining Your AI: Sycophancy, Risks and Responsible Strategies for Legal Professionals" Oklahoma Bar Journal March 2026](#))

4. Ask the AI to provide its sources and then double-check all sources:

To quote the Oklahoma Supreme Court: "There is nothing inherently problematic with the use of generative artificial intelligence in preparing legal materials, so long as attorneys abide by their duty to protect client confidentiality and recall their sacred duty to verify the pleadings they sign. The careless use of generative artificial intelligence to "save time" by not independently confirming citations is instead a waste of judicial resources and opposing party's time and money. It also damages the integrity and credibility of the legal system. Human diligence and review is required to ensure content and accuracy of filed documents. Signing pleadings that contain citations from generative AI that have not been verified shows a reckless disregard for the truth and an indifference to accuracy."

I would argue that the best way to avoid this issue is to establish a regular practice of checking all citations before submitting documents to a court or government agency.

5. Know that your clients are likely already using AI:

As generative AI tools are becoming more commonly used,

many of our clients may be turning to AI technologies for answers, both before and during representation. This may result in well-educated clients, but also may result in clients who have incomplete, inaccurate or misaligned expectations about their legal situations. (Some of these concerns are not new, as clients often come to us with incomplete understandings of the law based upon what they have read online or have heard passed on by their peers.) Moreover, these clients may also be inadvertently revealing confidential information about their case to AI platforms which could result in a loss of legal privilege.

The best advice I can give is to suggest that lawyers should: (1) educate our clients about the potential dangers of using AI (particularly as it relates to privacy and any potential obligation they have to not share classified information), (2) remind our clients that AI bots are not bound by the legal rules of ethics for attorneys and hence shouldn't be blindly relied upon, and (3) consider creating a "AI Usage" Disclaimer or an addendum to the representation agreement that clients sign. Such an agreement should explicitly state that the lawyer uses AI tools with safeguards, and that the client should not input case details into third-party chatbots without counsel's approval, and outline the risks of privilege waiver.

6. Do not overuse AI: Given the high environmental costs of AI systems, it is important to always ask, "Is this use of AI worth the cost" and whether it is more efficient to do the task without AI.

Note: The author wrote the first draft of this article without the use of generative AI, but did use the Lumo AI system to provide feedback, which was incorporated into the final draft.

Support my work with a one-time gift or a monthly sponsorship at:

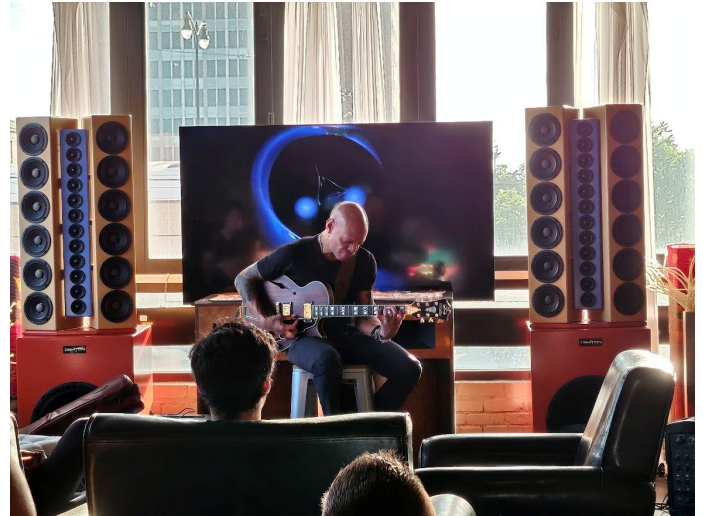
[Ko-fi.com/JMBranum](https://ko-fi.com/JMBranum)



A few pictures from my life in the month of June . . .



Celebrating my 50th birthday by playing harmonica with Jonathan Marshall (and his friend) at Anthem Brewing Co's 14th anniversary party



Hearing Mark Whitfield perform at the Leyenda Foundation Donor Party, at the Sound Bar.



Getting ready to cheer on Mexico in the World Cup!

Oklahoma City Community Pride Service at New Covenant Christian Church



Playing golf at The Links of Oklahoma City

