



IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

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TRANSITIONING BACK TO ME

As I look back on my career transition, I realize that the process included an external and an internal component, which were equally important.

MY EXTERNAL TRANSITION

After passing the bar, I took a job at a medium-sized firm, where I practiced employment law and corporate law, with a little litigation support thrown into the mix. I worked there for about four years with some incredible people who were supportive while I was in private practice and afterward.

For the most part, I enjoyed the first few years, or “the library years” as I sometimes like to call them. I relished the uninterrupted hours of research and writing. However, as my responsibilities grew and my client contact increased, my day became more fragmented and my satisfaction decreased commensurately. At the time, I couldn’t explain why I was so unhappy. I only knew that a little more of me was dying every day. I didn’t know then what I know now – that my personality and values simply did not match my chosen career.

Eventually, I took a three-month leave of absence to come to terms with what I already knew was the inevitable decision not to practice law anymore. Toward the end of my leave, the day came when I had to tell my firm that I would not be coming back – ever. I asked the woman who was my mentor – and who is still a good friend – to go to lunch. Although I knew I had made the right decision, I was still very nervous, as I had no idea how she would react and I really wanted the situation to end on a positive note. When I finally

told her, she looked at me, smiled, and quoted Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken” – a poem about choosing unexpected and “less traveled” paths in life.

My firm gave me a nice send-off – a wonderful ending and beginning. But now what? I knew that private practice wasn’t a good fit for me, but I didn’t know what was. I knew that I enjoyed writing and editing, so publishing was one avenue I planned to pursue. I wanted to explore all my options, so I started working with a career coach. In our first session, I anxiously confessed, “I don’t know what I want to be when I grow up. I just know I don’t want to be a lawyer!” My coach smiled and said, “Well, that’s a start.”

Out of that coaching relationship came what I still think is the best idea I’ve ever had: sell my house and car and go to Spain for a year. During my year away, I tried not to think too hard about “the future.” Instead, I tried to let my subconscious percolate while the rest of me enjoyed a reprieve from the rat race.

By the time I got home, it became clear that I wanted to look for a job as an editor. Within a week, a friend told me about the need for a full-time associate editor at the small financial publishing firm where she worked. I contacted the company, interviewed twice, and was hired to fill the newly created position. I worked at that job for three years. Along the way, I faced new sets of challenges, learned much about the world of publishing, and made more friends. In addition to my full-time responsibilities, I occasionally did freelance editing and also taught research and writing courses at a local paralegal college.

In my third year at the publishing

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company, I realized I needed to make another transition if I were to continue my personal and professional growth. So I left my job at the publishing company, accepted a part-time editing position, and entered into a new business adventure co-writing a book with another lawyer.

Overall, I am much happier as a writer and an editor than I was as a lawyer, not to mention being much better suited for these jobs. I have no regrets about my time spent in private practice, because the research, writing, and editing skills I developed as a lawyer serve me well every day in my work. And I treasure the friendships I made. Back in the “law world” again, I have come full circle. But I have transformed my working life to fit me, rather than the other way around. Outwardly, it was a fairly painless transition. However, I can’t say the same thing for my internal transition.

MY INTERNAL TRANSITION

Practicing law was all I’d ever wanted to do, professionally speaking. It’s no stretch to say that my entire identity was wrapped up in being a lawyer. Accepting that things had not worked out as I had planned was mentally and emotionally devastating. When I finally admitted to myself that my chosen career didn’t fit me anymore, it was as though someone had yanked my entire foundation out from under me. I was reeling. I remember acutely how empty and scary it felt to realize that I had changed, and I didn’t know myself anymore. At first I felt naked without a professional “label,” without a tidy, respectable summation of myself. It took me quite a while to get comfortable with that vast unknown, and even longer to see my situation as an opportunity filled with infinite possibilities.

I found the book *Transitions* by William Bridges to be a reliable guide during this process. In *Transitions*, Bridges points out that a true transition begins with an ending, followed by a neutral zone in which you must learn to accept the unknown. He explains that a new beginning can only grow out of this neutral zone.

Allowing myself to be in the neutral zone was one of the greatest challenges I faced in my internal transition. Although I was very skilled at using the rational side of my brain – especially making lists of

pros and cons to make decisions – I wasn’t quite as adept at other, more intuitive things, such as knowing what I wanted. It took time to get to know myself again and to distinguish my own inner voice from all the other influences around me, including family, friends, colleagues, and society. The “right hemisphere” of my brain was, shall we say, dormant. Thankfully, it revived with a little practice. I found ways to wake up the essential – but sleeping – parts of me and stimulate my creativity. I spent time alone, taking long walks, listening to music, meditating, browsing in bookstores, visiting museums, and doing things that used my hands instead of my head. Slowly but steadily I began to imagine possibilities and future plans that appealed to me.

I found that trying to determine my life’s work required a different process than the analytical process I used for legal problems. When I looked at job descriptions and ads in the newspaper, or talked to career counselors, I couldn’t visualize what was right for me because I hadn’t paused long enough to look inward and determine what I wanted my life to be like. When I finally took time to do this, I found that I needed to discover what made me happy – not a temporary, “tropical island vacation” happy, but the satisfaction that comes with using my unique gifts in a way that enriches both others and me. It helped me to use visualization techniques and answer questions such as: Where do I want to work (an office, a classroom, a studio, outside, inside, a restaurant, a boat)? What do I see myself doing, and am I doing it alone or with others? Does it differ every day, week, or month? I found my imagination to be like a muscle – once I started using it again, it became stretched, strong, and more consistent. When I realized that my imagination was awake and working again, I knew that my internal transition was taking place – and I was moving through the neutral zone to a new beginning.

CAVEATS ALONG THE WAY

If you are considering a career change, be careful with whom you share your embryonic dreams. The unvarnished truth is that not everyone wants to see you succeed. People who are themselves unhappy have a vested interest in surrounding themselves with like company, whether they are conscious of it or not. Dreams are fragile creatures, eas-

ily crushed in the early stages. When you first embark on a new path, be sure you talk to only those people whom you know are in your camp and genuinely want the best for you. It may take some time even for those who are in your camp to join in with you. Don't be surprised if your family resists your desire for a career change. Change for you likely means change for them, and, as we all know, change can be scary. So be patient with them and realize that you might have to educate them on why this move would mean a happier you and thus a happier family.

My other word to the wise is not to expect that you will necessarily discover your true calling or life's work in just one career transition. You may in fact find job nirvana in one long jump or even in a minor adjustment. However, it is just as likely to take you several career moves to get closer to the life of your dreams. Don't despair, though, at the thought of perpetual uncertainty. Once you've made one transition, you realize that not only did change not kill you (as deep down you feared it might), but that you have emerged from the process a more fully fleshed out human being. In fact, a small part of you is looking forward to doing it again (though you might never admit it). Maybe you discovered new interests and passions. Perhaps you even surprised yourself, uncovering little gems of knowledge about yourself that you never knew, or had forgotten. Hopefully, you won't forget how alive you felt, poised on the brink of change. These are the rewards available to all who dare to take the risk. Cost of the ride: courage.

Thankfully Moving in the Right Direction