

Answering Wake-Up Calls

All of us get wake-up calls that disrupt the routines of our busy lives. Fortunately for most of us, the wake-up call is not a shattering medical diagnosis. But whatever the event, each of us learns something about who we are and what we value.

By Dennis Coyne

Coffee With David

He called, introducing himself as a friend of a friend. He asked if we might meet for coffee, explaining that he had an interest in my work as a coach. (For our purposes, I'll call him, David.) I agreed to meet with David, telling him that we would have about an hour.

When we met the following day, David introduced himself in a matter of fact way. He was polite, articulate and methodical. After getting our coffee, we sat down on either side of a small table. David took two pieces of paper from his briefcase and placed them on the table, one sheet over the other.

Our conversation turned to the paper on top, neatly captioned with his name, and entitled: PROFESSIONAL. The resume detailed 20 years of accomplishments within his field. Every few years he made a change to bigger job assignments. As I listened, I couldn't figure out why he had asked me to have coffee with him. His career seemed to have a clear trajectory, without as much as a hiccup along the way. I glanced at my watch. Only twenty minutes left.

"Cancer" Was The First Heading Of His Personal Resume

David then took his PROFESSIONAL resume and moved it aside, to the edge of the tabletop, exposing the second piece of paper. Like the first, the second paper was captioned with his name. But this paper was entitled: PERSONAL.

David's PERSONAL resume was crisply divided into two parts. "Cancer" was the first heading, followed by a series of bulleted entries, describing the course of the illness. Logically, the first entry reported David's diagnosis five years ago with an acute form of cancer. The following bullet reported the treatment - doses of chemotherapy and months in the hospital, followed by nearly two years of remission. The next bullet noted David's relapse two years ago, his extensive research into other forms of treatment, and his choice of an unproven but promising course of treatment. Chemotherapy, Total Body Radiation, more hospital stays, many blood transfusions, and life-threatening complications followed the treatment. David lowered his voice and said that if he doesn't relapse again in the next few months, the doctors will consider him cured.

David's PERSONAL resume included "Other" as the second heading. His marital status and the names and ages of his children were mentioned here, together with his extensive travel - solo trips to the far corners of the world, hiking, backpacking, canoeing, and skiing. David's initial diagnosis

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prompted him to travel; the later news of his relapse prompted him to travel again. Each time he traveled alone.

He Asked How He Could Integrate The Professional And Personal Parts Of His Life

When David finished summarizing what appeared on the face of his PERSONAL resume, he moved it to the far side of the table, opposite his PROFESSIONAL resume. He explained that he was presently working part-time because he did not have enough strength to work full-time. And, he said if and when he returned to full-time work, it would be at the cost of his personal life. As he spoke these words, David became more animated. He said that his cancer had been for a reason. As best he could understand it, the cancer had been a wake-up call. He didn't really want to return to life as usual, unable to benefit from what his illness had taught him. And then he asked how could he integrate the PROFESSIONAL and PERSONAL parts of his life, represented starkly on opposite sides of the table as two dueling resumes.

I glanced at my watch. An hour had passed. David thanked me for meeting with him, and we agreed to stay in touch. We simply didn't have time then to grapple with the question that he asked – how can we be professionals, and still have personal lives? Or, put another way, what good are wake-up calls, if we all-too-soon return to the relentless demands of our work.

The Impact Of David's Story

Does David's story kick-up some emotions in you? Have you ever felt like David, that your identity as a lawyer was at odds with your personal life? What have you done to bring some balance into your life? What questions would you ask David, and what advice would you give him?

David's story stirred me, particularly the image of the two resumes resting on opposite sides of the table and his assertion that returning full-time to work would be at the cost of his personal life. No one had ever spoken to me in such stark terms about making such a terrible choice.

If I see David again, and I hope I do, I will ask him several questions, intended to stimulate reflection and to help him answer how he might integrate the PROFESSIONAL and PERSONAL parts of his life. Initially, I would explore his wake-up call; how he makes choices in his life; and who he includes in the company he keeps.

Honoring Wake-up Calls

All of us get wake-up calls that disrupt the routines of our busy lives. Fortunately for most of us, the wake-up call is not a shattering medical diagnosis. But whatever the wake-up call, each of us learns something about who we are and what we value. Richard Leider makes this point succinctly in his book, "The Power of Purpose", when he observes that crisis is the mirror of purpose.

So, I would ask David what he learned in his wake-up call, and what it is that he wants to remember and incorporate in his life. I'd press him to be clear and concise in his understanding of the wake-up call. The clarity will help him to ground the learning and give it expression in his life.

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Seeing Yourself Capable Of Making Choices In Life Will Enable You To Be More Proactive

All of us make choices. Yet, many of us carve out an aspect of our life and declare that it's "simply the way it is", as though "it" is fixed and immutable. For some, it is a job; for others it is a relationship. Whatever it is, we excuse ourselves from doing anything about it. Many of us become victims, spending time licking our wounds and complaining. Simply put, we are stuck.

When a client presents such a predicament to me, I ask her whether she knows anyone who sees "it" differently, and makes other choices. If she can identify such a person, or concedes that there must be such a person somewhere, the client realizes that choice is possible because others handle the situation differently. While the client may decide to do nothing about the predicament, she will at least see herself making a choice in the matter. And, seeing herself capable of making choices in life will enable her to be more proactive, and to see more possibilities and options in the future.

I would talk to David about his choice to fight his cancer, especially after his relapse. At that time, his prognosis was poor and his treatment options exhausted. What prompted David to do the research? How did he summon the courage to be a human guinea pig, and endure months of an unproven and painful course of treatment? How did he see the possibility that he might survive when so many others had given up on him?

I see David as a warrior, capable of uncommon courage and discipline. Why then is he resigned to the fact that his work "is the way it is" and that he can only return to it full-time at great personal cost? My sense is that David could transform his work, or aspects of it, in the same way he transformed his illness and reclaimed his health. But that would only be possible if David decided to take up the challenge.

All Of Us Should Be Aware Of Those Around Us – Who Is Healthy And Who Is Toxic?

During the many weeks of his hospitalization, David was in forced isolation. He had to make a visitors' list, identifying the few people who were allowed to see him. Of course, there were many people he could ask, and many more who would likely show up at his door uninvited. But because he was so prone to infection, and infection threatened his fragile grip on life, David's doctors insisted that he invite only a few people. And they needed to be healthy. No one else was welcome, and no one else was permitted to visit.

All of us should be aware of those around us – who is healthy and who is toxic? Who supports us, and who, wittingly or unwittingly, undermines us? Who encourages us to grow, learn from our experiences, and risk new initiatives? Who would have us simply remain the person they've known for so long, comfortably laminated in an all-too-familiar identity? Who do we know who has re-directed her life, and whose example inspires us?

My friend, Milton, recently described his circle of friends as an existential ensemble. In their company, Milton is better able to make sense of his life, to sustain himself, and to stay on course. I relate to the notion of friends as an existential ensemble. Members of an ensemble are selected, are mindful of each other's talents, and play to each other's strengths. Together, they find hidden

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harmonies and make music that no individual could make alone.

So, I would ask David how he made his selection, and what criteria he used to decide who would be allowed to cross the threshold of his hospital room and join him in conversation. His choices and his rationale would reveal a lot about David, and who and what he needs to sustain him. This self-awareness will serve David well in the days ahead. The company David keeps will support him as he pays attention to his wake-up calls, and attempts to re-direct his life.

You Must Ask For What You Really Want

Many centuries ago, the Persian poet, Rumi, spoke eloquently about wakefulness.

The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you,
Don't go back to sleep.
You must ask for what you really want,
Don't go back to sleep.
People are going back and forth across the doorsill
where the two worlds touch.
The door is round and open,
Don't go back to sleep.

The words of Rumi have been a guide to me since I first heard them. In fact, hundreds of times each day, his words circle my laptop screen, encouraging me to action: "You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep."

My hope is that the words by Rumi will encourage you to pay heed to your wake-up calls, that you will keep good company, and that you will ask others for what you really want. And I hope that you will find that the door is round and open, and that choice is possible, in whatever predicaments confront you. And, like David, I hope that you choose life and seek possibility. It's possible to do. ■



Dennis Coyne has practiced law for thirty-five years, most recently as a shareholder in a major Minnesota law firm. He is also a certified Hudson Institute life coach. Dennis works principally with lawyers as they learn to better align their values with their busy schedules. He serves as adjunct faculty in the Masters of Arts program in Human Development at St. Mary's College, and teaches environmental law at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul. For many years, he has convened a highly acclaimed seminar: "Our Challenge – To Thrive in Our Chosen Profession". In 2005, Dennis joined with Hamline Law School to present a series of CLE's entitled: "The Courage to Teach Law with Integrity". Dennis can be reached at Coyne Coaching and Consulting, LLC, by phone at (612) 375-0155, or by e-mail: dcoyne@denniscoyne.com.