

Courting Near Disaster

What incidents in your life have taught you that you can take time for yourself? An illness, a birth, or a death? Regardless, it is a question worth considering

By Dennis Coyne

They gather as friends, for lunch. All are mid-life, partners in their respective firms, and successful in their law practices. Oftentimes, the conversation turns to a well-worn topic. What near disaster would give them a good excuse to take time away from the office, but would not prove to be life threatening, or disfiguring? For some, it would be a slip on the ice and a broken limb. For others, a car wreck with some injuries, but none that would too serious. For still others, it's an illness that carries with it a doctor's instruction to stay home for a month, or so.

When Mary Was Diagnosed With A Chronic Condition, Her First Instinct Was To Defy Her Doctors And Continue In Her Practice

My coaching client, Mary, a successful and sought-after lawyer, recounted these lunch conversations to me. She had just returned from the hospital, with a diagnosis of a chronic condition and an accompanying instruction from her doctors to take a six-month sabbatical. For Mary, her diagnosis was really more serious than she had wanted. In fact, she was angry. Although she had courted disaster, the diagnosis was really too frightening for her liking.

In any event, Mary now had her opportunity to step aside from the frenetic schedule of her law practice. But what would she do, now that her leave was at hand? (As she speaks, an image from a war scene comes to mind—soldiers in a foxhole under heavy enemy fire, calling in for air cover. And, when covering fire is delivered, the question is whether and where the troops will run.) In any event, Mary's first instinct was to defy her doctors and continue in her practice, without interruption.

Many Clients Are So Busy Selling Their Time That They Don't Consider Buying-Back Some For Themselves

This story may remind you of conversations you've had with your friends. Or, it may remind you of days you've spent at home, with a cold, the flu, a broken limb, or a sick child. Perhaps these days at home, although somewhat unpleasant, had a luxurious quality to them, providing time for you to catch your breath, perhaps even take a nap.

As a life coach, I often challenge clients on the proposition that they can only take time for themselves, if they get sick or are disabled. Many clients are so busy selling their time that they simply don't consider buying-back some time for themselves. For them, getting sick is about the only time they ever have for themselves, other than an occasional few days of vacation. And on vacation, how many lawyers do you know who take their cell phones and laptops with them, in order to stay in contact with their office and their clients?

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What I Learned From A Bout Of Flu And An Aside At A Deposition

I used to be a lot like Mary, and her friends. A couple of life events provoked me to think about things differently. The first was a bout of the flu that taught me about being dispensable; the second was an aside at a deposition that taught me that I could actually take some time for myself.

First, I'd like to tell you what I learned from a bout of the flu more than 30 years ago. At the time, I was starting my environmental law practice. I had been assigned a major case and had prepared for weeks for a hearing in the matter. On the morning the hearing was scheduled to begin, I was ready to proceed, and so were my experts. But, when I awoke that morning, I felt sicker than a dog. In fact, I was too sick to get dressed and leave my house. So, I called the hearing examiner, told her the facts, and she continued the hearing until further notice. That morning, I learned that the world could go on without me.

Second, I'd like to tell you what I learned from another attorney at an out-of-town deposition. We were deposing a truck driver, questioning him about the disposal of drums at a contaminated site. Each of our clients was a Potential Responsible Person (PRP) at this Superfund site. And each of us was attempting to refute the proposition that our client's drums ever got to that landfill. I had traveled to Philadelphia for the deposition and I figured it would last at least a day, probably two. The stakes were high; we all were seasoned environmental attorneys; and each of us was capable of asking innumerable questions.

During the second day of the deposition, I sat there numb, listening to the many questions, and the occasional objections. It seemed as though the deposition would never end. Just then, one of the attorneys leaned over and whispered, "Let's get out of here and go to the Rodin Museum. It's only two blocks away." I gasped. What heresy -- to leave a perfectly good deposition and have some fun. It was as though Lucifer had entered the room, to sorely tempt me.

These Two Modest Incidents Taught Me A Lot About My Ability To Fashion My Own Life, A Day At A Time

But, when I caught my breath, I realized that I had already done what I could for my client, and that I could as easily leave, as spend a few more hours there. So, we closed the deposition and spent the remainder of the afternoon at the Rodin Museum. While I recall seeing the Rodin figures and marveling at them, what I remember the most was feeling like a mischievous young schoolboy, playing hooky. Simply put, I learned that I could claim some time for myself. In that case, all it required was some encouragement from a friend. In fact, he hadn't been Lucifer at all.

These two modest incidents taught me a lot about my ability to fashion my own life, a day at a time. I continued to work hard and to serve my clients well. But, I never again had the excuse that I was somehow indispensable and so important to others that I couldn't take time for myself. And I learned that I could welcome spontaneity and rethink some of the conventions of everyday law practice, and do so without compromising the interests of my clients. In fact, my clients preferred working with me when I was more fun and less stressed-out.

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So, What Incidents In Your Life Have Taught You That You Can Take Time For Yourself?

Has it been an illness, a birth, or a death? Or has it been something that a friend said to you? What else? It is a question worth considering. Better yet, it is a question worth discussing with a friend or trusted advisor. For, you see, the attorney who can take time for herself does not have to court near disaster, leaving it to the Fates to decide when and how she takes time for herself. ■



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