



Are You Considering A Sabbatical?

Don't be surprised if you come back a changed person

By Dennis Coyne

Until Sue walked into my office, I never spent much time thinking about sabbaticals. I thought they were only for academics. I also thought they were a euphemism for extended lollygags.

But Sue, who had sought me out for career coaching, changed my thinking. She'd just returned from a three-month leave of absence, and wanted some help in navigating her way back into her day-to-day existence as a lawyer in a large and prestigious law firm.

Six months earlier, as a third-year associate being paid a "ridiculous" salary, Sue had asked her law firm for some time off. She liked the work she was doing, appreciated the training she had received, and was fond of many of the attorneys in her office. Yet she was tired and unsure whether she wanted to spend the rest of her life working so many hours, under such pressure. "I was so stressed-out," she explained, "that I wasn't really myself." She simply wanted to take a break, catch her breath, and get a change of scenery.

Sue's law firm was surprised by her request. They had no leave policy for sabbaticals, only for pregnancy. Yet they granted her wish.

After putting the contents of her apartment in storage, Sue set out on her travels. She found her way to New Zealand where she met walkabouts who were on their own sabbaticals, often for a year or two. Day by day, conversation by conversation, Sue got to know—and like herself—better. She discovered pieces of herself that she had long neglected, like her creativity and imagination, sense of humor and love of adventure. She began to see more possibilities for herself, and came to realize how narrow her focus had become while working at the firm.

A month into her trip, Sue discovered a remote resort, about to close for the season. She spent a few days there, taking hikes along the beach. One day Sue was flooded with ideas of what she might do and how she might live upon her return to the States. These ideas came "out of the blue" and sparked her interest. She noted the ideas in her journal, but didn't experience any need to take action on them.

Don't Be Surprised If You Come Back A Changed Person

The months went by quickly and Sue soon returned to the firm, committed to give her job "the old college try." But she realized that life at the firm had not changed. The pace was too quick, the demands were too many, and the stress weighed heavily on her. Deciding to see what possibilities might exist for her outside the firm, she sought my help.

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When Sue's friends at her firm learned that she was looking for other opportunities, they counseled her to stay put. Surely, life outside the big firm could not compare favorably with its prestige and pay, they argued. Then the headhunters appeared, whispering of career suicide unless she immediately sought another position with a big firm.

But Sue wasn't convinced they were right. Curious about other positions, she interviewed attorneys in solo, small and mid-size firms. Many, she learned, combined the practice of law with other interests—playing in a jazz group, teaching law, writing and studying in a broad range of subjects. Others, freed of the need to meet high billable hour requirements, were active in politics or local charities and found time for biking, running marathons, hiking or rock climbing.

Eventually, Sue left the big firm to take a fellowship at a prestigious law school. There, she continued her studies and became an expert in her area of specialization. She spoke to lawyer groups and to trade associations, and wrote extensively for law publications and trade journals.

As her fellowship drew to a close, a start-up company asked her to do some work for them. Sue decided to represent them, and to hang out her shingle. Her first office was her dining room table. Later, after she asked her roommate to vacate the apartment, she converted the second bedroom into her office. Today, Sue is hiring an associate and moving her practice to an office building a few blocks away.

The Benefits Of A Sabbatical Will Stay With You Once You're Back Home

If you ask Sue, the trajectory of her career as an attorney was set in the course of her sabbatical. She credits her time on sabbatical as providing many benefits, including the following:

- It helped her become more authentic: "Today, I know myself better. I understand what I like and what I don't like. I know what resonates with me and I make decisions more easily. I am more self-confident."
- It helped her take risks: "Today I can tolerate being uncomfortable and do things I couldn't do before, like public speaking in front of a large audience. Now, taking risks and stretching myself is tolerable. For example, I decided years ago that a solo practice was simply too risky. But, look at where I am now. Today I am totally excited about the practice of law, and I'm doing it on my own."
- It provided her with a sense of adventure: "Every day is its own adventure. Imagination is my guide, allowing me to see new possibilities and create new opportunities for myself and my clients."

What advice does Sue have for others considering a sabbatical? Be clear about why you're leaving, and develop a narrative that explains your departure and your return.

No Two Sabbaticals Are Alike

That was Sue's experience. One thing I've learned is that no two sabbaticals are the same—they are as individual as the lawyers who take them and the circumstances in which they find themselves. Take for example the experiences of Tom and Billy.

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Tom, a bright, personable man in his mid-forties, is married with three children. He recently sold his business for a good price. With the profits in hand, Tom planned a long-awaited sabbatical. He did not want to cross an ocean, nor travel to some distant shore; he simply wanted to do some extensive hiking and spend time outdoors. But within hours of the start of his sabbatical, Tom's wife was stricken with a life-threatening disease. Now, Tom is at home, tending to her and their children. These days, Tom's journey is inward, exploring his emotions, his options and what the future may hold for him and his family. He is grateful for this sabbatical. Without it, he wouldn't be at home where he is needed.

And then there is Billy, a senior partner at a large firm. Billy is satisfied with his practice and has no interest in leaving his firm. But Billy recently arranged to take a three month sabbatical so that he could finally write his father's story—something he'd wanted to do for years. After he interviewed his father for many hours and reviewed countless family photographs, Billy wrote the book. When it was finished, Billy returned to his practice, energized by fulfilling a long-held ambition, and confident that his father's story will not be forgotten.

Consider These Factors When Crafting A Sabbatical Policy

Some firms, realizing how valuable sabbaticals can be, have encouraged lawyers to take advantage of them, and have adopted sabbatical policies. Here are some key components:

- Sabbaticals are available to partners after nine years in the partnership, and thereafter every nine years. Lateral hires receive special consideration.
- Sabbaticals may be taken for a period of up to three months. Partners can do what they please while on sabbatical.
- Those taking sabbaticals need to plan and coordinate with others at the firm to ensure that clients will receive continuing and effective representation while the partner is on sabbatical.
- While on sabbatical, partners receive full compensation. The management committee may reduce compensation for any subsequent sabbaticals taken by a partner.
- The program is administered on a "compensation neutral" basis, with no "extra" compensation for those who choose not to take a sabbatical.
- If a partner leaves the firm within 18 months of taking a sabbatical, other than through retirement or expulsion, the portion of income allocable to the sabbatical period must be returned to the firm.
- No more than 10 percent of the firm's partners may take a sabbatical in any year.

Is A Sabbatical Right For You?

In sum, taking a sabbatical can be a real benefit to lawyers and to law firms. It's also true that taking a sabbatical is not for everyone. Those who need to be in lock-step as they advance in their careers should probably keep pace and take no break. The same is true for the faint-hearted. But for some, sabbaticals provide an opportunity to learn valuable life lessons, fulfill commitments, and live life differently.

I've come to learn that sabbaticals are not just extended lollygags. In deciding whether a sabbatical is right for you, talk to someone who will listen carefully to you and challenge you with good questions

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about who you are, what you value, and where you are headed.

You can also read the words of the poet and writer David Whyte from his book *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*:

We shape our work, and then, not surprisingly, we are shaped again by the work we have done. Sometimes to our distress, we find ourselves in a place where the work suddenly seems to be doing all the shaping, where we do not seem to lift ourselves out of the mud of our own making, where we do not feel able to shape ourselves at all. At this point no strategy will free us from our imprisonment; no new organizer will organize us into something new; we need time and a renewed sense of the breadth and depth of time in which to do the reimagining that is the essence of self-shaping. It is the reimagining of ourselves in our own private time that allows us to then reshape ourselves in conversation with the world.

FOOTNOTES

Whyte, David, *Crossing the Unknown Sea: Work as a Pilgrimage of Identity*, Riverhead Books, 2001.



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 career coach and certified by the Strozzi Institute as a somatic coach. Dennis works principally with lawyers to better align their values with their busy schedules, take effective action, and achieve results for their clients. As they do so, lawyers learn to better lead their lives, and to become leaders in their communities. Dennis serves as adjunct faculty in the Masters of Arts program in Human Development at St. Mary's College, and has taught 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." And since 2005, Dennis has joined with Hamline Law School to present a series of CLE's entitled: "From Rules to Ethics: Identity, Responsibility, and the Recovery of the Law as a Profession."

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