

WHENCE THE WIND?

PRONUNCIATION: 'DOL-DRMZ.' ETYMOLOGY: PROBABLY AKIN to Old English. 1. A spell of listlessness or despondency. 2. A part of the ocean near the equator abounding in calms, squalls and light, shifting winds. 3. A state or period of inactivity, stagnation or slump.

You needn't take to the seas—high or otherwise—to find yourself inert amid the eerie silences of the doldrums.

It often starts in law school, where parts of you ache in the frothy surf, though the cause is uncertain.

Frederic Hudson, a well-known expert on the adult life cycle, writes about the doldrums in his book *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal*. He quotes from the classic children's book *The Phantom Tollbooth*.

"The doldrums are where nothing ever happens and nothing ever changes," says Milo, the protagonist. "The main thing we do is to kill time." (Or should that be "bill time"?) Indeed, for a lawyer who finds himself in the doldrums, time isn't necessarily a friend.

But it can be a wake-up call.

ENDING THE SLUMP

MINNEAPOLIS LAWYER AND LIFE COACH

Dennis Coyne describes someone in the doldrums as "being in the breakdown lane on a highway. You're parked there, but you don't know how to get out of it."

"I've been in the doldrums," says John McShane, who practices family and criminal law in Dallas. "For me, it's not despair or depression. You often see it in lawyers who have recently gotten something that they really wanted—a corner office or a big verdict, or a new boy- or girlfriend, or making partner after 10 years. Then comes the question: What else can I do? What might make me feel better?"

Managing the doldrums, according to Hudson, begins with a threefold sequence. First is sensing decline, followed by feeling trapped and resisting change.

Sensing the decline isn't easy, but it offers the benefit of truth. "Why isn't my life as alive and challenging as it used to be?"

Feelings that frequently accompany the doldrums include disappointment, resistance, anger, pain and suffering. On the other hand, certain activities tend to open the possibilities: looking for a new job, spending time with friends, creating an exit plan, taking a sabbatical, and so on.

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Although most of us assume that age determines how many options we, in fact, have, it's really not true.

*One ship drives east, and another west
With the self-same winds that blow;
'Tis the set of the sails
And not the gales
That decides the way to go.*

*Like the winds of the sea are the ways of fate,
As they voyage along through life;
'Tis the will of the soul
That decides its goal,
And not the calm or the strife.*

"The Winds of Fate"
—Ella Wheeler Wilcox

LIVING THROUGH CYCLES

THE STEADY STATE RULE DOES NOT WORK, FOR ANY OF us. Life is cyclical. Ups and downs are a way of life. As we reflect on our life experience, we come to recognize that this is true. The doldrums are not a destination.

Yet, in that space, it feels that way. We know that many in our profession, at any given time, are in the doldrums. Just look at the high incidence of depression and substance abuse in the profession.

So, how do you get unstuck? How have you gotten unstuck in the past? Do a "life line," mapping out the highs and lows, and identify the ways in the past that you have set your sails and moved on. Perhaps you have:

- Gotten physical, exercising with a personal trainer or returning to sports.
- Returned to a favorite interest or hobby.
- Joined a discussion group of some kind, perhaps a book club, a men's or women's group.
- Renewed friendships or made new friends.
- Became active in a pro bono matter or community service.

Our time in the doldrums leads to a transition, a way out. Maybe you will, for example, continue to practice law, but with a new associate, a different firm or a different focus.

Or maybe you will make a fundamental change, by forging an entirely new direction of practice, joining a public interest group or moving from government to private practice.

As you transition, you should ask:

- What do I hold on to?
- What do I let go of?
- What do I take on?
- What do I move on to?

The cycle of renewal is fundamentally optimistic, for all roads out of the doldrums lead back to an "up period" of full engagement in life. ■

