

Your Practice Becomes You

Transform yourself by identifying and then practicing what you love to do.

By Dennis Coyne

It was time for my annual physical and the inevitable lab work. I don't like giving blood, so I try to distract myself from the needle at hand. With that in mind, and with my shirtsleeve rolled-up to expose my arm, I casually turned to the nurse and asked her about the photo taped to the nearby wall. She told me that the boy and the girl in the photo were hers, and that the photo was taken several years ago when they were in middle school. In the photo, both children were stony-faced.

Glancing at the photo, the nurse quipped, "They were practicing that stoic look, in middle school. Truth is, my daughter now has a nice smile, and even smiles for pictures. My son, though, still practices that stoic look. It's pretty much who he's become. Too bad about that because my son is such a nice young man." Before I knew it, the nurse had the blood sample she needed, and I was out the door.

As I left the office, my attention turned to the nurse's comment about how her children had practiced stoicism, and her son had become a stoic. Her observation rang true, for I know how practices have shaped me, and how practicing has shaped others.

In fact, we become what we practice. The cynic has practiced cynicism and the worrier has long been a worrier, while those who have practiced the art of possibility become more creative, and those who practice stillness become calmer and less reactive when their lives are inevitably disrupted.

Rely On Your Practices As You Seek Change In Your Life

As I do my coaching, I focus on the life story of each of my clients in an effort to learn about the past practices that have shaped them. I especially want to know about the practices that have sustained them, and what sustains them now that they are in the midst of their transition, or hoped-for transition. The story of Liz, a former client, illustrates this point.

Liz was in her 50s, a successful and well-respected attorney. Typically, she worked a sixty-hour work week. In terms of life-work balance, Liz wanted more time for herself along with a more fulfilling law practice. To make the transition, Liz needed to believe in herself, access her enthusiasm and self-confidence, and learn how to sustain herself over the arc of her transition.

When we began our coaching conversations, I asked Liz to write a brief autobiography. Each time we met, she brought a few more pages. As a child, Liz had a young friend who played the piano.

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Watching her friend play, Liz longed to have a piano of her own. When she mentioned this to her father, a man of modest means, he told her there was no money for it. But Liz's mother felt it important that her daughter have a piano, if at all possible. Each week, Liz's mother set aside a few dollars from the allowance she was given to run the household; eventually, there was money for the piano, and Liz began her lessons.

Playing the piano comforted Liz, and sustained her through the many transitions and frequent tribulations of her high school and college years. When she began her law career, though, Liz was so busy that she found little time to play. Although the piano accompanied her wherever she moved, Liz never found time to play it.

As Liz told her story, I wondered if playing the piano might once again comfort and support her, especially during this time of transition. When I suggested this, she said that too many years had passed since last she played for her to begin playing again.

A few weeks later, Liz reported that she had awakened in the middle of the night and was drawn to play the piano. Soon, she was practicing a melody she had loved as a child. Time flew by and soon it was morning. After that, Liz practiced two or three times a week for the joy and comfort it gave her.

When a client finds a practice to support and sustain her, she often finds another. The same was true for Liz. After one of her friends invited her to take a ballroom dance lesson, Liz signed-up for some lessons. Over the weeks that followed, she learned a few dance patterns. More importantly, she learned how to follow her dance partner and move gracefully in synch with the music. Dancing became a wonderful counterpoint to her day job during which she sat at her desk or at a conference room table, being brainy and thinking her way through the challenges and confrontations of each day.

Eventually, Liz identified the job of her dreams: she wanted to work at a major public institution. Though she knew the competition would be keen, she applied for the position and participated in several rounds of interviews. As one of the finalists, she was scheduled to be interviewed by the president and his senior staff. She methodically prepared for the interviews, doing her research and practicing the answers to the questions they might ask. The night before the final interviews, Liz went dancing. The following day, as she moved from interview to interview, people commented how at ease she was, and how she able to move with the ebb and flow of each conversation, following the lead of each interviewer.

A few days later, Liz learned that she had been selected to fill the position. Sustained by her two practices, she accomplished her sought-after transition. These practices were not simply the sum

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of reading some sheet music and learning some dance steps. At their heart was Liz's love of music. As she played the piano and followed her dance partner, Liz learned to be present in the moment, access emotion, and be expressive. Through it all, she became more confident that she could accomplish what she set out to do.

Of course, not everyone plays the piano or enjoys ballroom dancing. Nor does reading sheet music or learning a dance pattern guarantee a successful transition. The challenge for each of us is to identify which practices sustain us.

Several practices sustain me. First, I exercise at a health club so I can increase my stamina and capacity to be an effective leader. As I reach my aerobic threshold in spin class, I remind myself why I am in the saddle, pushing the threshold of my physical endurance. I also meditate for the sake of being calmer and less reactive in the hurly-burly of life, and find that I am more peaceful and at ease on the days when I meditate. Third, I take ballroom dance lessons so that I can become a more effective leader. When I first met my dance instructor, I explained my reason and she understood: that's how I knew that I had found my teacher.

Grow Into Yourself By Attending To What You Love

Here are some examples of what clients wanted to introduce in their lives and the practices that have helped them do so:

- o To be calmer, less riled - practice meditation, walk outdoors, and listen to music.
- o To be more expressive - practice journaling and other writing, read poetry, act, and play music.
- o To have more stamina - exercise, eat a better diet, and get more sleep.
- o To be more creative - practice an art form, or find possibilities in challenging circumstances, as explained in *The Art of Possibility* by Benjamin Zander.
- o To be a better leader- practice taking risks, speaking up, and becoming visible; or leading on the dance floor, for the sake of being a leader in the conference room and elsewhere.

As you look for the right practice for you, be clear what you want to accomplish, and identify recurrent practices that will support you in achieving your goal. Be mindful, too, of practices that may no longer be useful, or that may even stand in your way. As a child, you may have been quiet and submissive observing others and learning from them. Although being "seen and not heard" may have worked for you years ago, today this strategy is probably preventing you from becoming a leader.

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As you choose or abandon a practice, create a narrative why you are doing so. Be clear about your motivation. Tell someone what you are setting out to do, and ask her to hold you accountable. Remember that we are the sum of our practices. As Aristotle observed: "We are what we repeatedly do."



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