

DO NOT GO GENTLE...

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Vexation

My vexation builds upon Amy Cox-Peterson's (2007) Crossroad venture: "So, my venture is to do something different, to think differently, and to act differently. I can now work under my own rules. I am puzzled about what I actually want to do because I have not really thought about it...." Her presentation at last year's Crossroads was a reflection upon her course of action following tenure until she "graduates as a professor" coincident with her son graduating from college. Well, I am at that latter stage – my daughter graduates from college in 2009. I feel very restless, unsatisfied and perplexed that, at this stage in my life, I still struggle with the question "what (who) do I want to be when I grow up?"

Starting at a very early age children are used to being asked this question. The questioning gets a bit more frantic when they are teens in high school and, even more so, as they approach college graduation. I think at these stages of youth everyone expects that there is AN ANSWER – that there is a goal to be reached – that there is a destination in life. One of my daughter's friends was recently bemoaning a situation and said something to the effect "well, I guess this is part of growing up" – as if there is a point where you are "grown up", as if "grown up" is an end to something.

What I have started to see, however, is that asking "what do I want to be" doesn't seem to end. While I don't hear this from younger colleagues, I find that many of my older friends, with kids out of the house, are also still asking that question. Like Heidi Carlone (Crossroads 2007) I am also drawn to the quote cited in John Settlege's (2006) Crossroads keynote address: "To live is to be continually deciding what we are going to be. Do you see the fabulous paradox that this holds? A being that consists not so much in what it is as in what it is going to be and, therefore in that which it is not yet" (Ortega y Gasset, 1966).

Although I take some comfort in understanding that this unknown future is a common dilemma – that doesn't bring me any closer to a solution/resolution. I am drawn to this at the moment because I am asking myself almost daily now, what do I want to be – am I doing what I want to be doing? This is my situation, it is a personal one impacted by a "job" that is no longer fulfilling. I have never been a "live to work" person. I am lucky in that I have a job that is relatively secure, somewhat useful with some wonderful colleagues. Why am I not happy and fulfilled? Is it suicidal to consider leaving this safe haven and want more – and what more can I realistically expect to find? As an academic, I don't think I am well trained (or trained at all) to think about my skill set and/or what I most like doing – we teach, do research, some type of service. Some colleagues acknowledge and are open about their "outside" life, but most are less so – as if our noble academic pursuits are all that matters. I don't recall ever being asked to think about what brings me joy and rarely have I thought about what it is about my job that I most enjoy.

To set the stage a bit, my employment history is that I have been a life science faculty member at a couple of universities, mostly "soft-money" positions with some teaching and research responsibility. Then, I was founding director at a nature center and finally, my current position involves significant responsibility for science education (training of science teaching majors) and outreach (programs to help teachers teach science, get students interested in science and, because I don't have enough to do, run a small science museum). This path has involved increased administrative responsibility and, for a while, the new skills needed and new programs developed or improved were a satisfying challenge. Because I enjoy the challenge of doing new things, I now find myself with a plate that is too full, nothing I believe I can give up to make room for a new challenge and, frankly, insufficient time to do some of these current tasks as well as I would like.

I think that the reason for my current situation - feeling restless and dissatisfied, increasingly impatient, is that I have been at the same job for a decade – "been there, done that" and I am not sure how to keep being challenged in a way that I enjoy. For the benefit of the program, it is probably time for someone with different ideas, with the excitement and energy that I cannot seem to find anymore. But (the big BUT) is that I don't feel that I am past my usefulness, I am not ready to be sent out to

pasture. I still have a skill set, I hope, but I don't know how to identify it or what the next step should be. I understand the value of risk, but have never been comfortable with it and I would be less anxious with the idea of this venture if instead of "walking away" I can be "walking toward".

While, on the one hand I consider my situation a highly personal struggle, as I began to work through this, talked with others, read a bit including many previous Crossroads articles I realized that this questioning is an on-going and common process. I was still hesitant to write about this for Crossroads until one evening when Steven Colbert interviewed Maria Shriver about her new book "Just who will you be..." If this topic is good enough for Steven Colbert!!, perhaps at Crossroads 2008 it is ok to question and focus on the WHO rather than the WHAT we will be and that this is an ongoing part of "growing up".

Venture

Walk away from my comfortable job and find something new to bring happiness. Do something different, think, act and feel differently. Where is my crystal ball? How do I find the courage to walk away – it feels like opening a door into the abyss, taking that step with faith that the parachute will open. Part, a big part, is of course the economic worry – was there ever a worse time to retire (I am reasonably sure that answer is yes – don't most potential retirees have this stress). A lesser stress, but ultimately more important, is will I find something to do that will be satisfying? Boredom isn't an issue, I have plenty of things I can do. It is the feeling that comes from being useful, of value and creative that I want.

My interpretation of the Dylan Thomas poem is a very loose one, I am not raging against imminent physical death but a fear of irrelevance, uselessness. I (quite egotistically) want to have mattered, at least to a small subset of the population (outside of my family). There are several categories of options: I could do more of the same in a different location, seeking employment as an education consultant at a university or with the Utah State Office of Education. Teaching youth requires skills that I know I do not have and moving is an option that would be quite difficult. Maybe I could find a donor to take Science Olympiad to another level. What I need help with is thinking outside this box - part of me wants the courage to try something totally different: what is the skill set that most of us have and how/where else can this be applied? Should I teach SCUBA to a cruise ship audience or plan and run art programs for a local volunteer organization. I rant against poor writing, can that energy be channeled somewhere. Science Education is my comfort zone, but I am looking now to identify and explore some of the paths not taken. If I need to rage, maybe it should be against a facet of the Depression era parenting we baby-boomers received, where a career was for life (my Dad had only one job, as have my two siblings) and change greatly feared.

It might seem that my venture is to identify something to "walk toward", however, that has never been part of my career path. I have never left one position to go to another. For one reason or another one position has ended and, soon after, another has become available. The cliché of "when one door closes another opens" has actually been true for some aspects of my life and thus my venture is to find the courage to take that first step - to walk away from my current job with all its comforts and see what happens, trusting that the parachute will open. Preparing this presentation has been incredibly helpful and the differences in the perspective of my academic friends compared to those in other careers quite enlightening. After so many years of focusing on what "needs to be done" it is incredibly hard, as others have indicated, to even think about what we WANT to do, what do we find joy in doing, WHO do we want to be.