

Making A Career Transition: Finding A Story That Fits

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What do you want? What do you truly want? Don't be surprised if you have trouble answering that question. If you're like many of my clients, you may know better what you don't want. At the same time, something is pulling you. Has your career gone flat and started you wondering about more satisfying alternatives? Or are you experiencing a sense of urgency about paying attention to dreams and goals you've been carrying around for a long time? If so, you're in good company, because you've entered the beginnings of a transition, whether you know it or not.

Times of transition push you to pause and take stock of your life, looking back at where you've been and looking forward to where you're going. They provide an "opportunity to discover what you really want," according to transition expert William Bridges. No wonder the time seems ripe for internal questioning – What do I want to change? Would I do things differently if I had the chance? Am I headed in the direction that's right for me?

Questions like these put you in touch with your personal story – that continually evolving masterpiece made up of your history, experiences, successes, challenges, and hopes for the future. During any period of transition, it's common to reflect on whether or not you like the story you're in or would prefer to find a new one. And more often than not, these reflections center in large part on work and the satisfaction you derive from it. In fact, according to a recent Gallup survey, 72% of those polled would seek more information on career options if they were starting over.

As a career counselor and life coach I've had the honor and privilege of listening to the stories of many would-be career changers. Hopeful, wistful, funny, sad, dreamy stories, all inspiring in one way or another. I've come to respect the surprisingly paradoxical nature of telling your story: not only does it give meaning to your past experiences, but it also builds courage to create future dreams and goals. In essence, it moves you closer to a future story that is more purposeful and self-actualizing.

Let's look at a few stories that illustrate this point. Take the experience of Larry, for instance. He felt stuck in his retail job. It was meant to be a short-term gig to get through college, but he ended up staying with the company and working his way up to management. He felt disconnected from the work and had lapsed into a half-hearted commitment to it – "I've been doing it so long it's like I can just phone it in." He knew it was time to find a new story, but how?

At first glance Larry's story may seem mundane and boring. In fact, he saw nothing special within it, surely nothing that would illuminate his future career path. But a closer look revealed a number of important themes. It turned out that Larry had a history of resisting new things that might be fun and satisfying. He usually stood back, played the observer role, and remained uninvolved. There were turning points, of course, times when he could have made different choices. But because he hadn't he'd slowly learned to equate work with drudgery and boredom.

This insight led to Larry's first goal: he decided to experiment by being more proactive in his current job. He figured that even though he didn't like his job he could try to make more of a commitment. Interestingly, this one action helped him feel better almost immediately, releasing his energy to explore greater possibilities.

As Larry dug deeper into his story, he acknowledged that most of his high points had involved children: mentoring high school work-study students, volunteering as a Big Brother, being surrounded by adoring nieces and nephews at a family reunion. Larry connected with

this theme and paid attention to it. He's now finishing his student teaching at a local middle school, where he's built strong relationships and is in line for a teaching job.

No doubt you've heard countless other stories like Larry's: the married insurance agents who realized that their happiest moments were planning and hosting parties, so now they're innkeepers at a bed and breakfast; the teacher who recognized that what she wanted most was balance and health, so now she's a nutritionist; the stock broker who loved science and solving puzzles, so now she's getting her master's degree in forensic chemistry.

As you hear these stories you might find yourself thinking, "I wish I could do that, but it's not possible for me." If so, you're in good company, because it can feel overwhelming and insurmountable, a path that only a special few can navigate. The irony is, however, that if a voice is telling you it's impossible you're probably ready to take your first steps on the journey. In fact, the louder the voice the more ready you are!

Consider this: a recurring theme in many stories and myths is the hero's reluctance, at least initially, to make a change. There's a reason this comes up again and again - it mirrors the human experience. For some reason it's necessary to say "no" a number of times before you can allow yourself to say "yes" or even "maybe."

Larry and the others would readily admit that they experienced their share of "no's" as they moved through their career transitions. They sometimes felt doubt and uncertainty, but they had help along the way in the form of career counseling and coaching. The process allowed them to tell their stories and look at them from different angles, as well as identify important themes, traits, and talents that they wanted to take forward into new work.

Career counseling and coaching also assisted them to move past discouragement by introducing a host of different strategies to try: acknowledging gifts and strengths, getting in touch with deeply held beliefs and values, experimenting with unearthed interests and budding curiosities, exploring techniques to make obstacles and risks more manageable, setting realistic goals and taking action, and reaching out to build support networks.

In the long run, these strategies helped them turn "no" into "yes," and the time and effort they put into their career development process was worth it because they're no longer living out a rewritten version of someone else's story. Quite the contrary, their new stories feel authentic and real.

In short, each is creating a career story that is meaningful. And meaning is a word that makes everyone's heart beat a little faster these days. Whatever else the 21st century may bring, so far it appears to be a time in which individuals are seeking more meaning from work and career. In spite of (or perhaps because of) downsizing, layoffs, and overseas job migration, people seem more willing to consider taking that leap of faith to follow their hearts and find the story that fits.

Remember, your story is waiting to be told. You have the ability and resilience to identify your career aspirations and goals and make them come true, one step at a time. Just like the characters in stories and myths, you can forge ahead. Don't let your emerging story be forgotten. Take the opportunity now to listen for it and nurture it by taking a course in a new area of interest to test the waters. What better time to start?