

Vocational re-evaluation: pausing to take a personal and occupational inventory



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For many physicians, medicine dominates life perspective. Hard work and dedication to patients and craft have resulted in busy, successful practices. Often, this kind of practice is rewarding on many levels — professional, financial and personal. But not always.

There are instances when work takes on a kind of drudgery and becomes less fulfilling, or conditions have changed in ways we can't appreciate or alter. But we trudge on. It's all we know. Responding to patients' problems has become routine. We function with rote, unconscious competence that ceases to thrill.

Worse, there is a risk that the ennui will seep through the occupational membrane and stain our personal lives. Focusing on survival on a daily basis, we lose sight of the values and grand vision we once had, the stuff that propelled us joyfully from moment to moment.

It's time to pause and take stock. No business can be successful without regularly taking its inventory and making necessary adjustments.

Following is a personal account by a physician who recently took a few days away from her practice and home to participate in a vocational re-evaluation retreat.

"I roll out of bed out of sheer determination. Another Monday morning, pushing myself to work. I grab a cup of coffee, pack up the unfinished

patient charts, can't find my car keys.

I am tired, very often tired, and cranky. I am impatient with the drivers following the speed limit as I'm late for work yet again. I mentally review the chores of the day and my panic grows as I remember more and more jobs left over from yesterday.

I arrive in my office parking lot, upset at the growing congestion there. I grab my bulging briefcase and various other odds and ends. I run into the building and haul myself up the stairs.

I grumble to myself until I get to my office door. I simultaneously turn the doorknob and turn on a professional smile. I greet my secretary with pleasantries about the weather.

I grab my day sheet off her desk and steal off to my office. I cringe at the sight of several patients' names. Some are unpleasant, some are very sick, and I have more and more difficulty obtaining the help they need. Some have been my patients for too long, and the weight of their problems wears me down.

I know my view of the world is distorted this morning since there is no one on the list I am looking forward

to seeing. I wonder what I could do to recapture the energy I once had.

I have already made several changes in my work and personal life since coming across "12 Steps for Physicians Who Seek Re-humanizing."¹

I have been attending a monthly support group based on the 12 Steps for a year now, and I am ready — but quite frightened — to take an honest look at the dissatisfaction I feel. I understand that change is a long process and I have come to believe in serendipity.

A few days later, while attending a professional conference in Toronto, I come across an orange CareerCycles flyer at the Physician Health Program display (see CareerCycles ad p. 18). Although I am usually not impulsive, I register as soon as I return home. It is a question of following my intuition.

I have come to know the OMA Physician Health Program as a trustworthy source of support in my quest for healthier living. If the PHP is sponsoring it, it must be worth trying.

I count the weeks, and then the days, till my departure. I do the written preparatory work, and start making 'a searching and fearless personal

inventory of our problems, strengths, goals and dreams' (this is Step 4 of the 12 Steps).

The 'goals and dreams' portion seems a little more elusive than the 'problems' portion. I obviously need help in moving beyond the trapped feeling.

Step 2 of the 12 Steps says: *'We came to believe that accepting help and support from everything life has to offer could restore our physical, mental, social and spiritual health.'* I pack my journal, my bike and nothing but casual play clothes, and I am off to beautiful Prince Edward County early in June.

The inn is a very comfortable, homey place. There will be three days of delicious meals, restful nights, and long cycles on country roads.

The group trickles in and gathers in the cozy dining room. I feel at ease with everyone and look forward to the three days ahead. We share the first of several wonderful meals — particularly enjoyable because of the company, and the fact that I didn't have to prepare it.

We then gather in the well-appointed sitting room and begin the group building process. Poetry is read. I know I am in the right place and am overcome with tears of relief.

In the morning, I sleep through the alarm for the first time in a long time. I feel rested, if a little sheepish, showing up late for breakfast.

The facilitators are well-versed in the business of career transitions. They lead us gently through the exploration of the paths that led us here. 'How is it that we decided to become doctors?' 'What have been the important events in our lives?' 'How important is money?' 'What are the values we hold dear?' 'Are we living according to our values?' 'Looking back at our lives till now, what do we discover about ourselves?'

Telling our stories, we begin to see them in a different light. We discover strengths and qualities we forgot we possessed, and we are touched by what we discover in each other. *'We shared our list with trusted others, acknowledging our character weaknesses, virtues and humanity.'*

(Step 5 of the 12 Steps.)

Energized by these discoveries and by the growing bonds uniting us, we begin the 'work' of dreaming of possibilities. I dream a small dream, quite similar to the work I am doing now. 'What else?' I am prodded gently. 'Think big.'

Lying in the sand dunes under azure blue sky, my spirit soars and I rediscover the joy of believing in myself. I know I will make a change in my work. I do not know the details, but I feel excited. I no longer feel trapped.

The time has come to share our renewal plans with the group. (Step 6: *'We were entirely ready to accept the help available to address our basic human needs.'*)

I acknowledge my need for group support, validation and celebration. I receive suggestions which will help move my plan forward.

There is a possibility of ongoing coaching should I wish to avail myself of it. The initial question posed was: 'What would be the best possible outcome of this workshop for you?' I had answered: 'I would have the confidence needed to risk

making changes in my work. I would be able to inquire about new possibilities just because they sounded interesting. I would be less cautious.'

Since coming home, I have enjoyed my practice a little more, felt less trapped, and noticed how privileged I am to be a doctor. I have been listening better and preaching less. And I have made several inquiries, talking to many people about my plans for a new area of endeavour, and received encouragement and support.

And I am grateful for all the wonderful people on my path who have helped me move on. How much easier it is to move forward with others, rather than by oneself." **OMR**

Reference

1. The "12 Steps for Physicians Who Seek Rehumanizing" are posted on the Physician Health Program Web site (www.phpoma.org/articles.html).

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