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The Sabbatical: Personal Revival

A health care professional shares the rejuvenating benefits of a step away from the work world

BY JEFF JUNG

Brave. Crazy.

Those were the two words I heard most often from friends and colleagues when I told them my decision. I had what many people would call a successful life: a good job, a beautiful home, close friends and family, and the chance for the occasional travel adventure. And yet, at the same time, I felt that I did not have control over my life. I felt that I had lost touch with the activities and interests that I was passionate about and that previously had centered my soul.

In August 2006, I started taking some steps to rebalance my life. I quit my job. I sold my house, along with most of my possessions. I committed myself to a proper diet and exercise regimen. By spring 2007, I was ready to travel the world.

Many working professionals struggle with the precarious balance of work and life. When we first start working, we are agreeable to putting up with the demands of our careers in order to advance them. Somewhere along the way, I lost the ability to maintain a balance between the demands of my career and the need to invest in my personal life in meaningful ways. I became career-focused to the exclusion of much that had been signifi-

cant in my life.

Did this mean I never saw my family and friends? No, but it did mean that time with them had to be scheduled like a meeting at the office. Did it mean that I stopped traveling entirely? No, but it did mean that trips to new destinations provided me with only a superficial understanding of the people and culture, assuming I had the energy or inclination to go somewhere without a beach or a pool. Did it mean that I did not patronize the arts? That I did not attend the theater, galleries or museums? Once again, no. But it did mean that I only had the time to gain a superficial understanding of a given cultural experience. What about a significant other? I didn't have time for that either.

My life outside of work was perceptible enough to keep me going, but not enough to keep me happy or to nourish and sustain me over the long-haul. By the time I realized what was happening, it became difficult for me to change course without a fundamental change in lifestyle.

SEEKING AMENDS

I had no balance in my life. A rational work-life balance was lacking, yes, but at its root it was more profound than that. I realized that I was taking care of everyone around me — except for me. I let my work schedule control me. It controlled not only where I was and with whom, but it dictated what happened with the time left over for my personal life. As a result, I had long since stopped pursuing activities that I was passionate about.



Taking care of myself physically came in fits and starts. Given my career in health care, I always found this ironic. One day, though, I had my moment of clarity. For so long, I had put my career and the needs of others before my own. At long last I reached a point where I felt I had very little left to give to others. If I was going to have a career in the future, I needed to take care of myself — now, not later.

Once I finally acknowledged the issue, I spent long hours thinking about what I could do to reconnect with my former self. It was not easy, and I came up with several variant recourses for what I should do before my ultimate course of action. In my case, I recognized that my true passion was travel. When I was younger, I had the opportunity to be part of youth exchange programs to Australia and South Africa. That is probably why I expect a cultural experience from my travel. But not since high school had I experienced one of those.

Furthermore, travel is the means to a greater end. When I travel, I study the local language, the history, the art. I talk to the people I meet, both locals and fellow travelers. Some of my best friends are people I met while traveling. I am proud to say I have a place to stay on every continent of the world. Once the thought about an extended travel sabbatical entered my mind,

I focused exclusively on that notion. I could feel my once-dormant, deep-seated passion stir again. It was like a sleeping giant waking up.

Needless to say, there were practical realities that had to be addressed before making a trip around the world and effectively leaving my career behind: finances, family relationships, housing, and my beagle, Max. Of course, having been so career-focused I had to weigh the pros and cons of stopping and restarting in the future. But I realized that the beauty of a mid-career break is the experience factor; I'm not fresh out of college.

If you have ever considered taking a sabbatical to rejuvenate yourself, here are a few steps that will help you prepare:

1. Identify the passion you wish to reconnect with. Travel, cooking, continuing education or exercise are only a few possibilities, and all are more than valid reasons to take a sabbatical.
2. Determine how long you can extend your sabbatical. Whether you are looking for a one-month break or a year's excursion, you will have to think about how you will handle the diverse responsibilities in your life.
3. Create a budget and make yourself financially sound. Eliminate all nonessential expens-

es and save, save, save. Determine how much you need and do whatever you need to be in a position to take the sabbatical.

4. Don't be afraid to do it. There is always a reason not to do it. But you deserve to put yourself first for a change. Most of the people in your life — employers included — will probably surprise you by supporting your decision. All will be envious of you for doing it.

Brave? Crazy? I'm sure I deserve to be called some combination of both. But I'll never regret the decision. I feel refreshed and see the world through rejuvenated eyes. I see many new possibilities for my future that I could never have seen otherwise. Whatever I do, I will be sure not to let my career control all aspects of my life again. I am determined to prove that you can have a successful career without letting it run your life.

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