

Column: Making Meaning: Which comes first, work or life?

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By Lynne Golodner

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What if we determined which school to attend and which career to build on the basis of the person we know lives deep inside us?

Instead, today, we do things backwards -- we choose careers based on what we think will provide well into the future, and we choose educational institutions on the basis of what careers they will prepare us for.

Where is the joy? Do we even know who lives at the core within?

Behind my desk sits a corduroy-covered journal from the 1970s, inside of which are scribbled stories, poems, skits and letters. I filled that journal during my childhood, when there were no demands on my work or time, and I found it fun and a demonstration of my true self to write.

That's who I am at the core, and I keep that journal in arm's reach from where I work every day to remind me of who I have always been. When we turn to that true self to inform our work, it propels us forward, and we are poised to reach great heights. We can provide for others because our cup is truly filled.

I'm lucky to have been able to work for myself for the past 22 years. Or perhaps it isn't luck. Some might say I created this situation, to have the best of all worlds -- to raise my children while supporting my growing family and setting the hours and boundaries of my work. I call the shots.

Of course, that means I always have to call the shots, which can be a gift and a burden. Every entrepreneur knows that while you have a limitless sky when you own your own business, you are also responsible for every dip and swell, every late-night worry and empty day.

I grew up in an entrepreneurial family, where I gleaned subliminal lessons of possibility at the dinner table. My father created his own scrap metal business when I was 10 years old, the oldest of three children, and my mother was raising us. He took the leap because she encouraged him to do so. "If you don't try, you'll always wonder if you could have succeeded," she said.

So he leaped, and built not only a company but a legacy where he was known as a leader in his industry. He did this because he loved what he did. He worked hard, treated his employees well, and when he came home, he left work behind.

These are the values that wallpapered my childhood, values I intrinsically took into my psyche and which propelled me to take chances of my own.

But where my father and I were different is that he never defined himself by the work he did. Rather, his work was his career and his family was his life. He could separate them when he needed or wanted to.

For years, I've ruminated over work worries while making dinner or doing laundry. I've read books to my children, then raced back to the computer once they were sound asleep. Work never ceased; at least, I didn't leave it. I forgot who I was at the core, so consumed was I in earning a living -- I forgot to build a life.

Which comes first -- the life we lead or the work we do? It is a choice, and we are the only ones who can make it.

When my father passed away in January, I started to see things differently. Life is for living, I realized, and worry, anxiety, and work-related stress have no place in this limited time we have on earth. When we can overcome these stumbling blocks, we are more open to success, and to joy.

When I was that little girl scribbling in my corduroy journal, I didn't worry about whether my story would sell, my poem would inspire audiences, or my skit would be beloved by audiences. I just wrote. I let my soul feed my stories, and I became joyful in the process of doing what I loved.

Yes, we must earn a living to make our way in the world -- but who we are must determine that path. This realization changed the way I approach my work profoundly. I no longer have time for unkindness or rude behavior from clients or coworkers. I gravitate toward the work that speaks to my soul. I realize the importance of shutting down the computer, putting my phone face-down, and sitting down to dinner with my family.

There is a time for everything, and the time is now. We have only this moment. What are we going to do with it?

This new approach brought me back to the core of why I started this journey in the first place: to have the freedom to take a walk during a breezy afternoon, to visit my child's classroom, to enjoy the first spring days. I used to work before the sunrise so I could be fully present when my children rubbed the sleep out of their eyes. The trade-off was worth it.

It can be hard in this 24/7-world to have enough silence and peace to remember who you are. Without that important check-in, though, we can't be effective in any situation.

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