

TRANSITIONS: Balancing the Spiritual and the Practical

by Ann Daly, Ph.D.

Q “I’m having a hard time balancing the spiritual wisdom of letting go of expectations and letting my life unfold one day at a time with the practical idea that I need to strategize, plan and prioritize so that I can accomplish my goals and create the life I want. How do I do both?”

A You’re having a hard time because the poise that you describe (so eloquently) is a hard thing to accomplish. Most of us are much better at one side of the equation than the other, either at pushing or yielding.

Creating a life requires both skills. You can push all you want, but life happens. And yielding will only get you so far.

The temptation is to go with what you’re better at. Instead, remember that pushing and yielding are two sides of the same coin. This sounds counter-intuitive, but they will support each other rather than cancel each other out.

Let me offer you a physical image. Consider how you literally move from here to there. If you control and tense your legs so hard that you lock your knees, you ain’t going nowhere. Conversely, if you’re too loosey-goosey, you’ll fall right on your butt. We move forward with the most ease when we are both grounded and flexible: when we’re committed to our goals and we’re open to new opportunities for achieving them.

For sage advice, I go to Kerry Tate. As owner of public relations and public affairs agency TateAustin for 16 years, she’s been creating a conscious life for a long time.

Most recently, she has chosen to transition out of that intense workaday world to something new, allowing her necessary time for the increasing demand of family and health issues and allowing the firm a smooth transition to the next generation of leadership. She sold TateAustin last year and is in year two of her projected four-year transition.

When I visited with Kerry at her office

several months ago, I was moved by the grace she brings to the process: she is focusing on the life she wants *and* she is open to unexpected opportunities. She describes the process as “a journey to find a slow, gentle departure from one stage into another.”

I wondered, what’s behind that grace? For one thing, Kerry planned ahead. About three years ago, she enrolled in Seton Cove’s Leadership Pilgrimage, where she began to give intentional thought to her work life. “My goal,” she says, “was to remain open to all of the ideas and opportunities that presented themselves.” She allowed time for this process, so that it wouldn’t feel forced.

In the meantime, Kerry designed a “career landing pad” to financially support herself, to give herself time for family demands and the design/build of a new home and to buy the time she needs to discover what’s next. She envisions that “landing pad,” Civic Interest LLP, as a “base camp for civic-minded people and projects.”

Even with all that planning and preparation, some degree of anxiety is inevitable. “What’s been centering to me, and helps with impatience, is learning a new spiritual practice. That includes good writers and poetry and meditation. And finding some fellow pilgrims who are outside of my usual sphere of colleagues and friends.”

Like most women in transition, Kerry’s greatest challenge is financial security. It was difficult, she explains, to give up the decades-old struggle to find that holy grail—the “right number” to assure financial freedom in retirement. “It was important to me to get a number that was, and is, simply ‘enough.’ The challenge is then to not revisit it. To just decide what is enough and live without worrying about it, so there is peace of mind.”

Another familiar challenge: to separate yourself from your job. “It’s easy to think that who I am is about what I do. So if I’m not doing that any longer, then who am I? That’s why the internal work is so important. It teaches me that who I am is not about

what I do, not about a role, not about a job.”

Any surprises so far? “The surprise is that I enjoy solitude more than I knew and how utterly restorative nature is to me.”

Kerry’s parting advice, dear reader: “Be unafraid to look inside. It is not a scary place, and it is easier than we think to find our way there. There are some interesting people taking the same pilgrimage, so it doesn’t demand isolation. It does, however, require some stillness—some quieting of the spirit.”

In brief:

1. Know your goals
2. Prepare yourself
3. Give yourself a generous time horizon
4. Design an interim “launching/landing pad”
5. Cultivate practices that calm your anxiety
6. Commit to what is financially enough
7. Be still and look inside



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