

Loss and Legacy

It isn't uncommon to wonder about the point of all the long hours or stress we put ourselves through or to question if we are making a meaningful difference. For the answers, it can be helpful to look to the lessons of loss.

On Interstate 5, the ribbon of highway that parallels the Pacific Coast, long stretches between major cities inspire a casual attitude toward posted speed limits. Eighty miles per hour is a norm for many drivers, including, for the past several summers, my husband and me.

This year, we slowed down long enough to visit Shasta Dam, which, at 602 ft., creates a spillway that is the largest manmade waterfall in the world. Walking the rim is a dizzying experience.

But what really impressed me was a film about the Dam's construction, which began in the belly of the Great Depression in 1938 and spanned World War II, finally being completed in 1945. The film features footage from a reunion of some of the 4,700 people who worked on the project. They toiled through hardships—living away from their families in crude conditions while enduring four to six months of pouring rain in the winter and temperatures as hot as 110° F in summer. Each of them

was just a small cog: One man nailed wood forms; another drove a bulldozer; a woman dished up meals in the cafeteria. But each of them pointed to the Dam with a “Look what I did” expression.

“No matter their position, they all had a sense of ownership and pride,” notes Sheri Harral, public affairs specialist for the Dam. “We host a reunion at the beginning of each May; 20 or 30 still come.

They may not be able to tell you what they had for breakfast, but they can still talk for two or three hours about what they did on the Dam.”

For each of these people, Shasta Dam is their legacy—evidence that they were here and that it *mattered* that they were here. Sooner or later, we may all lift our noses from the grindstone and ponder: “What’s it all for?” Informing our considerations of meaning and, ultimately, legacy may be achievement of goals. But even more compelling is loss.

In my late 30s, for example, I had to make a health decision that ended my ability to bear children. Like many career women, I had debated the “if/when” of motherhood. But I was taken aback by the chasm between “I’m not sure I want to” and “I can’t.” At the end of my days, without children to carry a part of me into the future, what would I leave behind me?

Or as the question is sometimes put: What would I want to see in my obituary?

I was propelled to switch my career emphasis from individual achievement to leadership. In one sense, the people that I managed would be my children. That purpose drove positive results as I moved up the ranks at a global communications agency. But toward the end of my 17-year tenure, I became more and more unsatisfied.

Then I lost my position in the wake of 9/11. At first, I panicked: What would I do without a place to go every day? Even worse: How would I support my lifestyle?

At the same time, I experienced a kind of relief. I had to admit that



work had always been a balancing act between the needs to belong and to be “authentic.” Virtually every day I had faced ethical decisions. In order to be a part of a company, I had to serve its interests and those of its clients, but would I have to do or say something too far out of alignment with my own values? I thought I had done the dance well and had kept my integrity intact. Once removed from the corporate web, however, I realized that, over time, I had shut off parts of myself and had stilled important pieces of my voice.

For example, I avoided controversy by hiding my Jewish heritage. So on the day when a farmer started negotiating fees by saying, “I want to Jew you down,” I was mute.

Even farther along the spectrum of sidelining one’s essential self was my friend Allen. He was quick to join in locker-room humor—eye-rolling hints at recent dates, jokes about buxom bimbos, snide digs at homosexuals. Even though he was gay.

“If senior management knew,” he confided to me shortly after he’d been promoted to head our business unit, “my career here would be over.”

Allen went public only on the day that he had to resign: Barely 40 years old, he was dying of AIDS. As clients and staff struggled to absorb the shock, Allen was overwhelmed by an outpouring of compassion. Perhaps Amy put it best: “All those years when we had events for family, Allen came alone. How awful it must have been for him to keep his secret!”

Even though I no longer have to keep secrets to fit into a corporate culture, giving voice to my authentic self has required conscious repatterning of habitual patterns. That leads to a different kind of question: What fits my talents, temperament, and times?

In the middle of that exploration, I experienced another major loss when my mother died.

**When you were born,
you cried and the
world rejoiced. Live
your life so that when
you die, the world
cries and you rejoice.**

—Cherokee saying

Much of my time and, more important, my identity had been invested in taking care of Mom and/or trying to make her happy. At first, the shards of loss stuck in my throat so that I could barely catch a breath. But as the edges of grief began to soften, I again acknowledged a kind of liberation. Energy was freed up for the question: What do I *really* want—to do and to become?

I’ve enjoyed the luxury of having room enough and time to try different things. Yet, again, I found myself uneasy. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi wrote in *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, “When there are too many demands, options, challenges, we become anxious; when too few, we get bored.” He concludes: “Accept-

ing a cooperative rather than a ruling role in the universe, we should feel the relief of the exile who is finally returning home. The problem of meaning will then be resolved as the individual’s purpose merges with the universal flow.”

Similar conclusions have been drawn by Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, author of the classic, *Man’s Search for Meaning*. Frankl’s early manuscript on the topic was stripped from him when he was transported to Auschwitz in 1944. He credits his survival of Nazi concentration camps to his “inner life”—how he thought about and responded to his experiences, including his determination to reconstruct his manuscript.

A friend recommended this book to me two decades ago, but I barely glanced at it then. Now, shaped and reshaped by life—especially by my losses—I resonate with Frankl’s words: “We need to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as...being questioned by life—daily and hourly....Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct.”

In other words, I’ve switched my legacy questioning from “What do I want to do in life?” or even “What do I want to contribute?” to “What does Life want from me?” **SF**

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