

What's Next? – Planning your transition from river guide to your next work adventure

In the early 90s I had a disturbing conversation with a retiring motor guide. He had been a very successful guide for fifteen years, and now he was contemplating making a transition that included moving to a big city and getting married to a woman he had met on one of his trips. He told me he felt like a failure. I asked him what made him feel that way and he replied that he was thirty-five years old and he couldn't afford to fly to Wales to see his dad. We all know how much skill it takes to successfully navigate those big rigs through the Canyon, including the high water years of '83-'85. And yet he had concluded that he was a failure because of the lack of money.

This was indeed a mid-life crisis, or as Carl Jung would describe it, a mid-life transition. Not only was he experiencing the angst of leaving the Canyon that had been his home for fifteen years, he was also dealing with finding another career as well as going from single to married.

As a life coach I focus primarily on the process of helping people travel from where they is to where they want to be, and I use a model to help people determine the strategies they will use. There are three stages to any transition (transitions are created when change happens, either because it's been imposed on us, or because we choose it voluntarily). The stages are: Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. Another way of looking at the stages is this: The caterpillar has to end its life to step into the chrysalis where the metamorphosis occurs that leads to the emergence of the butterfly.

As river guides, we all learn rather quickly that ours is a relatively short-lived career. For most of us, by the time we reach mid-to-late thirties, one, two, or three things are happening: Our bodies are screaming at us; our relationships are screaming at us; our bank accounts are screaming at us; or all three. Given this reality, it makes sense to prepare for all three possibilities early on. Or, to start preparing now.

Regarding our bodies, we only have one in this life. So it makes sense for us to take great care by employing proper body mechanics (for oar and motor guides), like safe lifting techniques, stretching, maintaining strong core muscles. If you're an oar guide, learning how to row so you don't put undue strain on your lower back; and if you're a paddle boat guide, taking care of your shoulders, wrists, and back. Also, since disease doesn't show up in the body until its well under way, start now by paying attention to what you put in your body.

Regarding our bank accounts, there are plenty of examples of guides who have managed to save and invest over the years in anticipation of making a transition. The younger you are, the more beneficial compound interest will be for you. Start putting aside money now – even a little bit each month will pay dividends in the long run.

This brings me to the subject of career transitions. Some of us will choose to go from full time to no time, others from full time to part time, and still others from part time to no time. How you choose to do this is clearly up to you. But unlike my friend above, I urge

you to begin now to plan for your transition. As river guides we are in a unique position. We meet people from all over the world and all walks of life. If you don't know what you want to be when you grow up, then start now by taking advantage of the rich resources that your passengers offer. Be curious about them and their work. Ask them the questions you might ask a job interviewer – yes you can interview them. Find out what they do, what potential there is in their field, and what they like and don't like about their work. If you find their field interesting to you, network with them; you might develop an ongoing personal relationship with them. If it makes sense, try asking them to mentor you as you explore a new career. The relationships we develop with our passengers are both intimate and personal. Some will want to help you, if ask.

Another resource that is available to you in making a conscious transition, are your fellow river guides. Many have already taken, these steps. There are plenty of examples out there. People like Bruce and Nancy Helin of Professional River Outfitters (PRO). Scotty Davis and Rachel Schmidt of Ceiba are also growing a successful rafting equipment rental business. All four have found a niche renting river gear to private trippers and science folks that has allowed them to remain connected to the Canyon. Several guides, like Brad Dimock and Christa Sadler have found a career as authors, Brian Dierker in a variety of fields, Fritz in science, Gary Casey and Nancy Nelson in law, Peggy Bartlett and Tom Wise in education, Justin Soloman and Gibney Siemion in rolfing, and Diana Snook (Snooky) in chiropractic, to name a few.

Also, the Whale Foundation offers career counseling. Take advantage of it.

When I coach people who are in transition, I suggest they create what I call an “Ending Ceremony.” I define Ceremony as ritual with heart. The purpose of the ceremony is two-fold: First, to celebrate what has brought you to this place of transition; and Second, to declare an Ending of “The Way You Have Been.” It's incredibly challenging to leave (or reduce) our job as river guides in the Grand Canyon. To make the transition both powerful and effective, declaring a conscious ending to the way you have been is essential. This might include attitudes, beliefs, and judgments about you as a river guide that will not serve you in your new beginning. If possible, find at least one other person you trust who can witness your ceremony, and then support you in your new beginning. You don't have to be familiar with ceremony to do this. All you need is the willingness. Remember, if you want to go where you've never been before, then you have to go where you've never been before.

Finally, please keep this in mind as you develop your own conscious transition strategy. You have to do “it” yourself, but you don't have to do “it” alone. One of my recent passengers, on the last night, said to the crew, “you guides are the very best that America has to offer.” What a powerful statement. We are in the service industry, and on the whole, we provide the most outrageous customer service around. Some of those who have been touched by us will be more than happy to support us as we develop our own life plan. And whatever you do, just like your passengers on your trips, enjoy the journey and the adventure.

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