

Strategy for Career and Life

BY CORDELL PARVIN

October 9, 1978, was the coldest October 9th in recorded history in Roanoke, Va. I had been married for eight years and had practiced law for seven years. Although I had a good life and career, the events of that day brought me to a crossroads that motivated me to map out my future success and a plan for how to achieve it.

That morning, I took my wife, Nancy, for her weekly visit to Dr. Julian Meyer's office. Nancy was seven and a half months pregnant. Early in her pregnancy, she was diagnosed with toxemia/preeclampsia, a pregnancy-induced hypertension. Women with toxemia not only have elevated blood pressure, but also face health risks for liver and kidney damage or failure and eye-sight problems. Dr. Meyer had warned us that Nancy's blood pressure would continue to rise over the months of her pregnancy, and, to our dismay, it did. Nancy's blood pressure was 200/155. Dr. Meyer said, "Ready or not, today is the day we have to take this baby, otherwise you are risking permanent damage." He told us he was not certain if our baby would be born alive or whether she would be born with birth defects.

At 7:40 that night, our daughter Jill was born. She weighed 3 pounds and 7 ounces. She was so small I could hold her in my hand like a doll. Nancy's blood pressure went down, but her white blood cell count also went down. One specialist after another was called in to diagnose the problem. On the 10th day after Jill was born, the doctors were getting ready to take Nancy's bone marrow to determine if she had leukemia. All of a sudden, Nancy's white blood cell count started to rise, and soon she was able to leave the hospital. After about four weeks, we were able to bring Jill home from the hospital.

During Nancy's pregnancy, Jill's birth, and Nancy's extended stay in the hospital, I felt totally out of control. I was just a "bit player" in the most important drama of my life. In this experience, I learned a great deal that created the strategy for my career and life, which I have shared with young lawyers over many years. At that point, I had not taken responsibility for my career. I wasn't sure why I was practicing law or what I wanted in my life. I didn't have a vision of what I wanted to become as a lawyer. Other than making partner, I did not have any specific goals. For eight years, Nancy and I had both worked hard (as

defined in those times) and had focused almost exclusively on our careers. Without warning, our priorities had changed.

What I Learned From Harry Chapin

A second thing influenced me at the time: the singer/songwriter Harry Chapin. I am sure many young lawyers have never heard of Harry Chapin, but I am fond of saying: "All I ever needed to learn about a strategy for career and life, I could have learned from Harry Chapin and his songs." With the words written by his wife, Sandy, "Cat's in the Cradle" was his most popular song. It is about a father who is too busy with work to be present for his son's birth and too busy with work to play catch with his son. Later, the son has his own family and is too busy to bring the family to visit his mom and dad. The father laments: "As I hung up the phone, it occurred to me, He'd grown up just like me. My boy was just like me." Through that song, I determined I would always make time to be with Jill and we would regularly have special father-daughter times. During my career, I traveled frequently during the week. Saturday afternoons were always father-daughter times, and what great times we had. I also went to work early so I could be home for dinner with Jill and Nancy. I normally worked from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays because, for most of that time, Jill and Nancy were sleeping and did not miss me.

Another Harry Chapin song, "Dreams Go By," resonated with me. It is about a couple who has dreams while in school, but they must wait to pursue them. They get married and decide to have children first. Later when they are getting ready to pick up their grandchildren, they lament: "But I guess our dreams have come and gone. You gotta dream when you are young." From this song, I learned to have big dreams and not to put off trying to accomplish them. After Jill was born, I decided to take control of my future. Much to the chagrin of my partners who wanted nothing more of me than to litigate their clients' cases, I decided I would focus on construction law and issues faced by highway and bridge contractors. My career dream was to become the best transportation construction lawyer in the United States, and I developed a plan to pursue my dream.

I also learned a great deal from Harry Chapin's life. He was a successful entertainer before he found fulfillment in life when, in the early 1970s, he became interested in world hunger. A priest had explained to Harry the good performers could do to raise consciousness and funds to change the world. Some singers would sing at one benefit, but not Harry. It is reported that he contributed the proceeds from 130 of his more than 200 concerts each year and that, to help the cause, he would sign autographs for everyone who had purchased souvenirs to help the cause. He was about to perform a free concert in 1982 when he was killed in an automobile accident. In 1986, Harry Chapin's family was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor in recognition of his efforts to address world hunger. His epitaph, taken from his song "I Wonder What Would Happen to This World," is:

*Oh if a man tried
To take his time on Earth
And prove before he died
What one man's life could be worth
I wonder what would happen
to this world*

Specifically, I learned from Chapin to find my passion and purpose in life and to pursue it. In 1978, I decided that my career purpose was to help my construction clients build great projects and achieve their business objectives. While I was not totally clear about it at the time, my life purpose was to be a loving father, husband, and son. I also found a desire to inspire teenagers to serve in meaningful ways.

My current life and career purpose and passion is to teach, coach, and mentor young lawyers on career and life planning. I find meaning in my own life when the lawyers I am coaching find success and meaning in their life and career.

Life in the Zone

Having grown up playing baseball, football, and basketball and watching great athletes, I always had a sense for what it was like to be "in the zone." Professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has written extensively on this concept. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, the professor describes the elements of flow:

1. Clear goals with immediate feedback. My daughter Jill became a rock climber when she was a teenager. That activity has clear goals — reaching the top without falling — and immediate feedback.
2. Balance between challenges and skills. If it is too easy, it is boring. If it is too difficult, it is frustrating.
3. Action and awareness merge. When a balance between the challenges of the activity and our skills exists, we must focus on the activity and then there is little distinction between ourselves and the activity. A rock climber reported to Csikszentmihalyi: "You don't feel like you are doing something as a conscious being; you are adapting to the rock and becoming a part of it."

4. Concentration on task without being distracted. This is closely aligned with the merging of action and awareness. When we are doing a flow activity, we are aware only of what we are doing. We are not distracted by outside forces or our mind wandering.

5. Sense of control. Joe Montana in Super Bowl XXIII reminded me of someone who was in total control of the situation. Down by 13-16 with 3:20 left in the game, the San Francisco 49ers started their last drive on their own eight yard line. Montana completed five consecutive passes and then completed two more, one for the winning touchdown.

6. Loss of self-consciousness. Focus is on the activity, not on anyone's evaluation of our performance.

7. Altered sense of time. In large part, because doing the activity is so enjoyable, people lose track of time.

8. Autotelic experience — auto (self), telic (goal). Motivation is from the self rather than from external sources administered as rewards and punishment.

Csikszentmihalyi later subdivided these elements into characteristics of flow and conditions of flow. Characteristics of flow refer to what people feel at the time, and conditions of flow refer to what the environment must be like to be conducive to flow. Looking at the list above, the characteristics of flow include merging of action and awareness, concentration on the task, sense of control, loss of self-consciousness, and altered sense of time. The conditions of flow include clear goals with immediate feedback and a balance between challenges and skills.

Developing Your Own Roadmap for Success

So, how can mid-level lawyers take what I learned and develop their own strategy for their career and life? Build a strategy by considering your life and career purpose, envisioning what you want to become, discovering your core values, and developing goals and a plan based on your life and professional roles and your priorities.

Success is generally measured in both extrinsic and intrinsic terms. Many young lawyers focus only on the extrinsic meas-

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ures and are unhappy. Extrinsic motivations cause me to do something better or have more than someone else. Intrinsic motivations cause me to do something because I enjoy it, it gives me a feeling of contributing, or it is the right thing to do.

Realize there are four aspects to our lives and only one is truly extrinsic. The first is physical/economic. We must be physically fit and creating enough income to support our family. This, generally, is an extrinsic determination. The second is mental. To be “in the zone,” we must always be learning new things and developing our skills. The third is emotional/relationships. We need strong relationships with our family, our clients, and our friends. The fourth is spiritual. We must discover and live our values. Anthony Robbins said, “Success without fulfillment is failure.” To be both successful and fulfilled, we must be operating on all cylinders in all four aspects of our life.

Your Life and Career Purpose, Vision, and Core Values

To discover your life and career purpose, ask why you wanted to be a lawyer and why you want to be one now. I was inspired by Clarence Darrow and Atticus Finch when I read *The Story of My Life* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. While my prac-

tice has not given me the same opportunities to serve as Darrow and Atticus Finch, I feel the same passion for my clients and try to embody what I believe made this real lawyer and fictional character special. If you can find a purpose that is centered on serving and giving rather than receiving, you will be more inspired about being a lawyer.

What is the vision for your future? What do you want to become? I find many lawyers who complain about what they are doing, but have not given thought to what they want to become. Lawyers who are “in the zone” have found an area of law or a client base that creates a passion in them. They see their work as fulfilling a need, and they work hard to be the best they can be. In 1978, I found this in working with the highway and bridge construction industry. I am passionate about the people in that industry. They are risk-takers who “dream big dreams” and contribute to the economic well-being of our country and state. So, think about the area of law or the type of clients that arouse your passion.

What are your core values? We all have them, but few of us discover what they are. Take time to discover how you want to live and what you value.

Don't Seek Balance — Determine Your Priorities and Live Your Life Accordingly

I maintain there is no such thing as work-life balance, and even if there were, it would be incredibly boring to try to live a balanced life. Instead of seeking to live a balanced life, I suggest lawyers spend their time based on their priorities and realize that priorities change over time.

What are your life and career roles? I learned this concept from Stephen Covey's books. When I was with a large law firm, mine were Father, Husband, Son, Practicing Lawyer, Business Developer, Practice Group Leader, and Head of Professional Development. I set goals and planned my year and each week around these roles. I find many lawyers who subconsciously plan their billable time. They are at the office from a certain time in the morning to a certain time in the evening. But, they have no plan for their non-billable time or their personal time. I put my personal roles at the top of my list because those are the easiest to neglect. Each week, I identify the most important thing I can do in each role and I plan it.

Any lawyer can see that there is no magical formula for career and life success. There is nothing here that is novel or earth-shattering. So, the key for us is not so much discovering what we need to do, but rather finding what will cause us to have the passion, commitment, and discipline to do it. For me, it was that record-breaking cold day in October 1978.

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has practiced law for 34 years. Through his business, Cordell Parvin, L.L.C., he works with lawyers as individuals and seeks to inspire and energize them based on their individual career and life dreams.

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