



where do I go from here?

MIRROR,
MIRROR, WHAT
DO I WANT TO
BE WHEN I
GROW UP?
BY ALEXANDRA
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Nancy, a successful executive, didn't know how to break out of a career in finance that was making her miserable. She researched her options and decided to take a course offered by Crystal-Barkley, a career- and life-planning group; she even recruited a few buddies to sign up. Nancy is now executive director of a nonprofit organization, and the others made similarly big changes.

I'd heard of such seminars and dismissed them as feel-good support groups, but Nancy persuaded me to talk with Crystal-Barkley's cofounder, Nella G. Barkley. I vented everything when we met: I was at a professional crossroads, in emotional gridlock and stymied by a lack of passion for any specific project. She listened and said they could help. The cost would be approximately \$1,590 for my two-weekend seminar, plus five hours of one-on-one sessions.

I pondered Nancy's success story and decided that five days spent concentrating on what my life was about could be illuminating and motivating. And, like a high-stakes bet to quit smoking, the not-inconsiderable tuition would drive me to work as hard as I could.

So, at 9:00 A.M. on a bone-chilling Saturday in March, I find myself sitting in a Crystal-Barkley meeting room. Our group consists of 14 men and women ranging in age from mid-twenties to mid-fifties, and an even wider range of careers: banker, art director, office manager, chiropractor, United Nations peacekeeper. Our affable group leader asks us to introduce ourselves with an anecdote about something we love doing. I talk about the wonderfully self-indulgent shopping and museum-visiting trips to Italy I take each year with a best

Is this all there is? I've been the editor-in-chief of a magazine, written four books, even developed the pink ribbon that promotes breast-cancer awareness. I've done everything I wanted to do. But for the past few years I've been trying to figure out a new direction for my life.

I remember saying precisely those words to my friends Harriet and Asher. The three of us, pals for 20 years, had just rounded the half-century mark and were evaluating our lives over dinner. Harriet owns a hip clothing store in SoHo. Asher is a literary agent who's also savvy about managing money. They knew exactly what they wanted out of the rest of their lives. I, on the other hand, wanted to take new risks, embrace new experiences. But which ones, and how? I was ridiculously clueless.

The next day I woke up at five, made coffee, then leaned back on my pillows, mug in hand, and began a serious life review. After graduating from college as a philosophy major with a penchant for writing, I got married, as so many of my generation did, and then answered a *New York Times* ad for an editorial assistant at a magazine and veered into publishing.

I worked as a reporter and journalist for several years before starting graduate school in art criticism. While I was getting my master's, I trundled my son off to school each morning, worked in a fish market as a cashier, dashed over to a part-time job at Bloomingdale's and wrote articles for magazines.

My taking-the-art-world-by-storm dream was soon relinquished—I found I couldn't support myself with "intellectual" writing. So I wrote a proposal for a book, *How to Make Love to a Man*, based on an article I'd done for *Self* magazine. It sold for more money than I'd ever dreamed possible. The advance on the next book was bigger; the third topped that. And, in a strange twist, the books led eventually to my six-year tenure as editor-in-chief of *Self*.

Exquisitely lucid from a second caffeine jolt, I came to the realization that I had always "followed the money," but never assessed what truly interested me. Art, my early love, had again become a central focus of my life, because I now live with a painter, but art criticism had long ago lost its attraction.

Soon after, a friend told me about something that had changed her life.

friend. We warm to one another's stories and quickly start to feel comfortable.

Then comes a challenging exercise: "You receive a million dollars. You must spend it on yourself." What a luxury! I buy an imaginary oceanfront apartment in Florida and a midnight-blue Jaguar convertible. I hire a full-time cook, a housekeeper, and a techie who can fix my computer at all hours. I spend a bundle on a greenhouse to grow orchids, and blow tons on Manolo Blahnik shoes.

Monique, a young art director from North Carolina, tells us how she'll decorate the house she plans to buy with her fortune. "I'll have a whole lot of rubber stamps, and stamp them on painted walls in the dining room. I want to use my own ingenuity no matter how much money I've been given," she says.

Another assignment: You have total financial security. Imagine the day vividly from the minute you wake up to the minute you go to sleep. Then imagine another day two weeks hence. Finally, imagine your day three months later.

I would wake up with my mate, Denis, in a happy house. Sea breezes ruffle the curtains. I'd read the papers lazily, make phone calls and then head toward

conduct a survey of it. By survey they mean research—reading, searching the Internet and talking to as many people as possible who have knowledge of the subject. Ideally, once we've done a meticulous survey, we'll eventually be able to make targeted "proposals" to key people so we can land a job we really want or start our own business. My subject: oceanfront condos in Miami's South Beach for under \$125,000.

Now comes time to learn to use the two tools that Crystal-Barkley deems vitally important: surveys and proposals. We discuss the results of our surveys (it's still possible, I'd found, to buy an inexpensive condo on the ocean).

Marjorie Long, our leader (who has since retired) explains why C-B uses certain terms and avoids others: "Never request an 'informational interview.' Interviewers are wise to the fact that most people use it as an excuse to hand over a résumé. 'Surveying' is the term we use for digging up information and making contacts. You can't think clearly about a career shift or look for a job until you are highly knowledgeable about your chosen field. We don't believe in résumés. They don't detail

disappointed in not finding an instant fix for my career dilemma? Absolutely not. I had spent five days thinking about no one but me, and the process had helped me see beyond my professional self. I learned what I really care about, and one clear goal is never to lose sight of this.

Months later, I'm still receiving and answering updates from classmates. Bob, a chiropractor with a megawatt personality, E-mails that "my heart is involved in the media. I nailed down an interview with the VP of CNN Interactive, and he suggested using my healthcare background as a steppingstone." Henry, a professor from Holland, was hoping to "contribute to the development of others." He now teaches human resources at a different university. In doing the proposal for his current job, he gained great insight into personnel issues and hopes "to be in the air with my own business eventually."

As for me, I thought of buying a commercial greenhouse; but given the other things that are going on in my life, I settled for growing windowsill orchids and I was on the trail of an inexpensive oceanview apartment in South Florida. What had completely seduced me was the Internet. I wrote a proposal, and investors offered my partner and me money to get it off the ground. Alas, it did not survive the Internet upheaval. In some ways I am back where I started, developing a magazine for women, but I've also kept my eye on the overall goal I'd set after my stint at Crystal-Barkley: use my creativity, make money, enjoy my family and friends old and new—especially in these unsettled times. ■

Alexandra Penney's fifth book, "The Magic Words" (Broadway Books) will be published in January.

CHANGING CAREERS

Crystal-Barkley offers regularly scheduled courses in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Atlanta; it will also accommodate groups of at least ten people at other locations. For information, call 800-333-9003 or log on to www.careerlife.com.

I know one thing absolutely—I want to work for the rest of my life at something that engages me creatively



my uncluttered at-home workplace, bare except for a sleek silver computer and a desk, chair and chaise longue. I might be working on a novel. I strain to visualize more, but nothing appears. Two weeks later, I see myself reading the newspaper on pale-peach silk sheets, but when I've finished I head out the door for an office ten minutes away. There are people in it, and we're completing a challenging project. Frustratingly, I can't visualize what it is, or I'd start it today—for real. When I picture myself three months later, I'm still in a quandary over what type of job I'm doing, but thanks to my directed daydreaming, I know one thing absolutely—I want to work for the rest of my life at something that engages me.

We are given our homework: Choose a "fun" subject that interests us and

the whole scope of who you are and what you can do. We've found that submitting a proposal to a prospective employer is the best tool for nailing what you want."

Typically, a proposal is written in short paragraphs, which outline what you alone can do for a company, the personal and professional skills that allow you to do the job better than anyone else, and a budget outlining what it will cost to achieve what you're proposing.

As the second weekend draws to a close, she encourages us to plan for follow-up meetings so that we stay motivated. We review our five days together, evaluate where we are and where we're going. Before heading back to our lives, we promise to keep in touch.

I leave the group and walk to a coffee shop for a solitary cappuccino. Was I