

RECRUITMENT

One way to do good while doing well



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Sharing the experience of a different kind of career counselling gives me sight of a path to fulfilment

This will be my last appearance in the pages of the FT. After 30 years – stretching from the Nixon impeachment hearings to conservative dominion in Washington, through two significant wars, inflation, deflation, stagflation, recession, and recoveries – it is time to move on.

Like millions of middle-aged workers, I feel trepidation about the uncertain economy. Will Medicare take up the slack as private health insurance slices away at my benefits or will Medicare be whittled away itself through future “reforms”? Will investments in the stock market be there when the time comes that I cannot work at all? And speaking of work, what shall I do if I am no longer a journalist, the only career I ever envisioned since I was 16 years old?

My work has always been defined by deadlines, and although these have grown increasingly burdensome, how to function without them? My identity has so long been linked with my job, who or what will I be without it?

Millions of workers have faced the same sort of dilemmas, but I was luckier than most. Nella Barkley offered assistance. She is president and co-founder of Crystal-Barkley Corporation, a group uniquely dedicated to guiding clients’ transition into careers that have meaning beyond salaries, prestige and benefits. The company offers a process which helps individuals align their work with their personal values and individual skills. And uniquely, the process continues beyond the five-day course through individual coaching and the formation of “action groups” among the clients.

Because I could not attend the first two days of the course, I had personal counselling from Ms Barkley, an elegant Southern visionary, who has for years counselled executives in corporate settings as well as the individual clients who go

through her courses. She has devised a system to uncover long forgotten or disregarded skills; organises them into clusters along with personal values; then develops lifelong goals and devises “roadmaps” to point the way.

The idea of having all-encompassing life goals rather than short-term objectives was as

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foreign to me as *escargots au beurre*. I had arrived at my only goal – to be a journalist – years ago. But . . . “Goals are complex constructs,” said Ms Barkley. “They don’t arrive full-blown. You need them for every area of your life.”

The final three days of the course, which I caught the following weekend, provided more revelations. Aside from me, there were four other clients from four different professions: the Rev Jimbo, an Episcopal priest, struggling through the recent loss of his son; Ruth Anne, a finance director, whose work limits her aspirations; Tiffany, a chic, edgy fashion consultant who “likes to make old things new”; and Mollie, juggling two careers as a compensation expert by day and a choreographer by night.

Although they are each considered “success stories”, they all share one hope; that somehow they can find a way to do good while doing well (that was my hope too when I began my career, but the realities of journalism require something other than benevolence).

The group jelled at once – bantering, philosophising, empathising, and counselling. It fell to Bob Scudder, the facilitator, to shepherd the unruly five through exercises identifying skills, passions and priorities and developing the plans for achieving their goals.

In one exercise, meant to help us understand our values and passions, we were asked how we would spend \$10m on ourselves. We were given another \$10m to give away and with a third \$10m representing financial security, we could spend time as we wished. We made lists about our preferred working environment and the qualities we seek in colleagues.

“We are different from traditional career-counselling services,” Mr Scudder said. “We don’t care about your past

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careers. We care about who you are and where you want to be. We don’t use formal testing and assessments because it puts you in a box that matches up your skills and interests but limits your possibilities.”

The notion of boxes was anathema to the group of raging individualists. At one point Mr Scudder opened the drapes of our conference room in a New York hotel and pointed out the workers framed in each window of the office building across the way. It was the end of a long day; they seemed weary and unenthusiastic. “They look as alive in their boxes today as they will in the boxes they are buried in,” said the Rev Jimbo.

At 56 he is searching for a less theological career and figures he has but “one more swing of the bat” in his effort to change to a more satisfying job.

Crystal-Barkley does not believe in resumés. It teaches clients to develop proposals for prospective employees. “We like our clients to go into meetings as peers, identifying needs, bringing information and presenting plans to address those needs,” Mr Scudder said.

In the end, everyone was identifying goals and making plans. Mollie wanted to consider the possibility of unifying her two different careers. She also wants to be head of the National Endowment of the Arts. Ruth Anne was exploring a group acting as advocates for the impoverished women and children in the world. And the Rev Jimbo was thinking of clinical counselling or human resources involvement.

Tiffany said: “It is all about fine-tuning my skills, refining my goals and focusing my life so that I can feel that I’ve done the best I can.”

We were deluged with material – including guides for building personal market research plans; forms to develop objectives; 30-day exercises to collect clippings from newspapers and magazines; progress charts; and assignments for subsequent meetings.

I had two basic clusters of skills – writing and researching, of course, as well as working creatively with talented children.

I did have an epiphany. I decided I could feel a passion working with children to develop plays and television shows. Forget that I know nothing about children’s television and have no particular contacts in the field or that my daughter responded to my bright idea with, “Yeah, sure.”

For, as Ms Barkley likes to say, quoting Robert Browning: *If a man’s reach does not exceed his grasp Then what is heaven for?*

By the way, that applies to women as well.