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Taking a Sabbatical: The Chance To Audition a New Self

By Larry G. Johnson

The pressures were too great, the rewards so few. So after 20 years of a stressful litigation practice, I decided to take an indefinite sabbatical from it all, maybe forever. That turned out to be one of the best decisions I ever made, even after unexpected twists.

If you are inclined to take a breather from the law or just chuck it all, my tale may offer you some encouragement and guidance.

The first step toward liberation is to take an honest appraisal of how happy you are and how much you can afford to do without; if you are willing to take a cut in pay, your range of choices is significantly bigger. Also, fundamental change often requires an ability to absorb some short-term sacrifices in addition to a taste for adventure and risk. Above all, real change requires leaps of faith.

If you are in mid- or late career, you may have forgotten it was indeed a leap of faith that got you into a life in the law in the first place. You no doubt imagined what it would be like to be a lawyer. Like me, you probably anticipated and fantasized it to be some glorious thing, only to find out later that lawyering was something much more mundane.

In the '60s and '70s, the big buzzword for rebellious youth was "being relevant," i.e., getting politically engaged. When I was just about to finish my Ph.D. thesis at Harvard in Germanic languages and literatures, it dawned on me that an academic ivory tower life would be a cop-out, not "relevant," so I quit that and went to law school.

I pictured myself becoming a civil

rights or criminal law courtroom warrior, fighting for the downtrodden and abused. But with the weight of student loans and the need to help support a wife and newborn child, that idealism was elbowed out by economic necessity. I did have occasional fun in the sports-like jock atmosphere of wins and losses in trials fought vigorously over money, ego or power, but that soon waned as my disdain for a wasteful and sclerotic judicial system grew, accompanied by self-loathing for my cynical, selfish involvement in that very system.

A defining moment soon arrived: During a contentious and tedious marathon deposition, a seasoned lawyer, blowing cigarette smoke out an open window, groaned in fatigued resignation, "I am way too old anymore for this crap." I thought, "*Everybody is too old for this crap.*" I saw in my mind's eye the cases that came and went in blurred successions of bankers boxes and Expando files, inevitably to be forgotten in dark storage somewhere like so many abandoned corpses.

So, following my too predictable mid-life crisis and divorce, I shut down my practice and packed my few possessions worth keeping into my Subaru and left Seattle for Minneapolis, the city where I grew up and where my brother and his wife were to put me up in a room the size of a closet. Actually, it *was* a closet.

I immediately signed up for a two-week course in bartending at the Minnesota School of Bartending. I had always thought I'd make a great bartender and had long secretly wanted to be one. I saw myself as a "Cheers" kind of bartender

who'd listen well to people's sorrows or misfortunes while soothing them with alcoholic libations. A working man's psychotherapist.

After two weeks of learning and memorizing scores of popular drinks and simulating their creation from former booze bottles now filled with variously colored waters, I passed the final exam (with occasional prompts and hints from the examiner) and got my Certificate of Mixology. It hangs today proudly on my office wall right next to my M.A. from Harvard (I enjoy telling people which of the two degrees did me the most practical good!).

One of the big selling points pitched to me by the Minnesota School of Bartending was its 90-plus percentage rate of placing graduates with jobs. I immediately got a 20-hour-a-week job as a singing bartender in a newly opened Italian restaurant/bar, an addition to the Romano's Macaroni Grill chain. I thought I would be a good fit for the job since I could sing different songs in Italian, the most important one being the Italian version of "Happy Birthday." I was often asked to sing that at tables where a birthday was being celebrated, and that garnered me a lot of tips.

On the application form for the job, I was careful to list as experience only the jobs I held while attending college (janitor, lab assistant) or that required only a little fudging, such as my limited experience in working behind a bar in a lodge owned by my brother-in-law in Colorado, where I often pitched in by pouring beers during the busy season. But even as I was filling out the application in a

construction trailer parked outside the restaurant not yet ready to open, it became clear I was going to get the job after being asked if I knew any Spanish. I said I did, and the 24-year-old Mike, soon to be my boss, exclaimed enthusiastically, “Hey, that’s great, you can help translate with the Mexican cooks, we can never figure out what they’re saying!”

Mike liked to order me around a lot as he did with all the help, mostly in useless ways, but chiefly to assert his authority, but I enjoyed the simplicity of the job. It was so clear what you needed to do, and I liked the customers with their small talk and the pretty waitresses I could flirt with.

It was so pleasantly stress free and therapeutic. I would put in a decent night’s work that was physical and rote, then I could hang up my apron at the end of the day, clock out and drive back to my brother’s house, where we’d watch TV, drink beer and mess around on the Internet. In some ways, it felt like high school all over again.

The main negative was being broke. Since 20 hours of bartending a week didn’t make me enough money, I eventually got three other part-time jobs: on Mondays during the day I was a docent in a piano museum in St. Paul; on Tuesday and Thursday evenings I taught adult German classes at a German cultural center, the Volkshaus, in St. Paul; and on Wednesday and Friday afternoons I taught a computer class to paralegal studies students at the Minnesota School of Business, a for-profit office vocational school. I now had four jobs, four different versions of me trying out different kinds of stuff.

My brother got me the piano docent job by his quitting that job so I could have it (now *that’s* a brother!). I learned from him all the history and patter about the old pianos on display, and I was al-

lowed to even play them, too, to show visitors how the pianos and harpsichords sounded and worked. Among them was a 1930s Wurlitzer grand piano with all sorts of art deco lines and Plexiglas contours — a masterpiece. And there was an upright piano about which Franz Liszt had confessed to “having played wrong notes and scribbled wretched music on this charming instrument,” words he inscribed in French into the interior of the instrument.

The German classes were fun; full of eager adults who *wanted* to learn and were planning trips soon to Germany. But the paralegal computer classes at the business school were a bit depressing. The students were predominantly welfare single mothers who were given financial incentives to further their education so long as they didn’t flunk out, but I saw in only a couple of students any real desire to become a paralegal, let alone a computer-literate one.

The newness and variety of these four appetizers combined to make a meal of work that lasted for about four months, and then the signs of the approaching Minnesota winter appeared: trees barren of leaves, brown grass, cold winds. The snow and ice would come soon, and Thanksgiving was now around the corner. I was homesick for my kids and old friends back on Vashon Island, and I sensed I was overstaying my welcome with my sister-in-law; as I would discover some years later, I was right.

Thus, at the best possible moment came my *deus ex machina*: a former doctor client of mine in Seattle called and said a fellow doctor was in big legal trouble, and only I would be the right person to defend him, so what would it take to get me to come back? Would a \$16,000 retainer and a new car be enough to coax me back? I had just that day figured out I made in one hour while practicing law

what it took me two days of odd jobs to match, and Mike, my martinet bartender boss, was becoming a major pain in the ass. I made myself count to three before eagerly accepting my return ticket back to Seattle.

Not only did I find myself grateful for once again taking on intellectually stimulating and remunerative work, but I also found it easier to be adventuresome about what I could do next with my law degree. My real passion since personal computers first became available in the 1980s was to find uses for them in the legal profession. I was an evangelist on that subject.

So, after listening to Joan Feldman, owner of Computer Forensics, Inc., in Seattle, speak at a CLE seminar, I went up to her and said, “I want to be just like you. I am a lawyer with computer expertise, and I want to work for you for free to learn what you know.” After we chatted a while, we met again, and she made me a project manager and apologized that it paid only \$35 an hour.

That was a princely sum to me after my jobs in Minnesota, but I did not let on. She promised to train me in the tools of her trade. Finally, after so many dead-end forays into other things, I had found my niche and taken the first step toward a whole new career in computer forensics and e-discovery.

I have lived happily ever after. ■

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