

EMERGING FROM STUCKNESS:

A case-study in career change process.

Let's call him Luke. He's an attorney who teaches Business Law at a local junior college. Luke was a thirty-something when he showed up at my office. Career ennui and aching arches prodded him into my presence. The pain in his feet provided foreground for our session. The career dissatisfaction lurked in the background.

We began with Luke's feet. They had been bothering him for many months. He sought relief from podiatrists, orthopedists and various orthopedic devices, all to no avail. In spite of thousands of dollars worth of consultations his feet were no better. In fact, the pain continued to get worse with no sign of relief in sight.

During the intake I learned that Luke suffered from asthma attacks as a child. We explored his past together trying to discover the source of his painful arches, ruling out accidents, birth defects and broken bones.

During the course of Luke's therapy I was invited by a colleague to give a 'lecture' on Gestalt to a class at the school where Luke worked. As I made my way through the corridors to the classroom I was struck by an overwhelming sense of futility and desperation. There was no joy present in that institution. The body language of both faculty and students projected a feeling of hopelessness that was palpable. I remember feeling as though I was in a mortuary. Everybody was walking around as though they had no way out. They were simply going through the motions as they waited for retirement or death. I noted that experience and found myself wanting to shake off that mood before I entered the classroom.

The next day I was scheduled to see Luke at four o'clock in the afternoon. As I was showering that morning, an "aha" idea came into my consciousness relating to Luke's feet. In Gestalt-speak his feet were 'saying' "I can't stand it." This notion sounded good to me, but I needed to check it out with Luke. That afternoon during our session I mentioned to Luke that I had a theory about his aching feet. He said he'd like to hear about it.

I said, this may sound strange to you Luke, but indulge me please and see what you experience as you say these words: 'I can't stand it.' He uttered the phrase a couple of times then looked at me and began to smile. I shared with him my experience as I visited the school and the insight that came to me in the shower that morning.

With this confirmation from Luke that we were on the right track, I designed an experiment-a la Joseph Zinker- to test it. Luke agreed to give it a try.

At my suggestion we both moved over to one corner of my office. I pointed to the corner on the left side of the room and said, Luke, this corner represents what happens if you stay where you are and keep doing what you're doing. I'd like you to take one step in that direction and report to me what you experience in your body. Luke took a step and said, I feel some tightness in my stomach; I feel sweaty; and my feet hurt. Good. I want you to take another step and tell me what you experience. Luke complied and said, my stomach is tied in knots; I'm sweating more and my feet hurt worse. Good. I'd like you to take one more step. I don't want this to be torture. I sense that this is something that is important for you to know. Luke took a third step haltingly and said, "Bob, my feet are killing me. If I go any farther I'm going to throw up in your office." That's OK I said, pointing to a trash can nearby. We can stop now. I think you know what you need to know about continuing in that direction.

Take a few deep breaths and we will continue the experiment. Next, I said, I want you to see what it's like to change your course and walk toward the right hand corner of the room. Let's call that corner the direction of your dreams. Luke took the first step toward his dreams and reported the sensations that he was aware of in his body.

L: The knots in my stomach are loosening up. I don't feel like I'm going to throw up any more.

B: Take another step. Be aware of what's going on in your body and report it.

L: The tightness in my stomach is gone and I'm not sweating so much.

B: Let's try one more step and see what happens.

L: My stomach is relaxed; I'm not sweating; and, turning to me with a big grin on his face, my feet don't hurt any more.

During the next few consultations things happened quickly. Luke applied for and gained acceptance into a master's program in Industrial Organization, his field of dreams. Within two weeks he resigned his teaching position at the Junior College.

Fast-forward two years. Luke now has in hand a Master's Degree in Industrial Organization. The next step is to take the GRE and to make application to several universities to gain admittance into the PhD program in I.O. Luke knew the target GRE score that his school of first choice was looking for in its potential candidates. After taking the test Luke was not confident that he had made a high enough score. Some weeks later when his GRE score arrived in the mail, Luke came to our session with a letter-size sheet of paper in hand. On it he had printed in large numerals his score. It was twenty points higher than he needed to be considered at the school of first choice. Luke applied to and gained acceptance into one of the elite programs in I.O. in the country. At this point Luke resigned from the Bar and shredded all his files from the years he had spent as a practicing attorney.

I lost touch with Luke for a few years as he moved to a different city to pursue his dream. Later I learned that he had graduated from that institution with a PhD in Industrial

Organization and accepted an appointment to the faculty there. He now serves as Chair of the department of I.O. at that university.

I wrote to Luke recently to ask for his permission to write this article. He called me on the phone to tell me that he granted that permission. As we talked he kept saying over and over during the conversation, "I just knew that I had to stop doing what I was doing."

That's what his feet were telling him.

Submitted by Robert W. Finertie,
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