

TURNING POINT: WHEN ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

In this article I want to talk about what I shall call a *turning point*, that is a point at which you have to decide that you have had enough of something and you need to take a new turn in your drive to reach your goals. Everybody does reach a turning point with regard to an issue in their lives, be it relationships, careers, habits, managing finances and a myriad other things.

Here is my story. Read and see if you can learn any lessons from it.

For the past 18 years I was employed in a government department; three years as a clinical psychologist and 15 as a manager. For the last 10 years or so in a management role life became a series of harrowing and, at best, challenging acts and scenes. As the quality of leaders (they like to call them *disciplined and deployed cadres*) continued to deteriorate to tragi-comic levels I decided to start planning for my life outside the comfort of a well-paid and “secure” job (at some point it had descended into a job, not a vocation – look up the differences in meaning). I decided to start a part-time private practice to lay the foundations for a future career on my own. Over the years, however, I decided practice served me well as an interest “on the side” as I could not imagine the isolation and boredom that it sometime brings. I realised I was a nine-to-fiver who loves being part of work teams and enjoys peer relations with likeminded colleagues.

Enter the dragons and the untouchables!

As years went by and leadership in government changed, more and more of Dr Frankenstein’s failed projects were deployed to manage the Department and its people. What a mess they made! The work environment deteriorated to a point where only people who were too damaged to realise they were damaged could survive.

So, I quit!

Yes, I quit the high paying, “secure” job that often bought me a 5-star life style to go into an entry level clinical/academic post at an academic hospital. That was not all. I had to take a 45% pay cut (yes, 45%). Was I perhaps going crazy? No.

Below I describe the process I went through in reaching my decision (these are the steps I followed in taking this difficult decision and they worked for me; each person’s circumstances are different and the paths would be different for all people):

Step 1: Self-awareness and acknowledgement of damage

I know myself and that means I know what I like and dislike, what I will and will not tolerate. I became acutely aware of the change in my demeanor and sense of who I am. For some time I knew I was no longer the best version of myself. I started to be consumed by self-doubt in my abilities (a result of the constant negative feedback and non-acknowledgement of good deeds), irritability in my daily

interactions with my loved ones, erratic sleep and overeating (accompanied by weight gain). I could feel I was no longer the best version of myself and my family could also see a personality change in me. I had to admit that I was getting damaged by continuing to work in an environment created and maintained by mentally ill people. I had to face the reality that I was getting damaged too. As I often say to my clients when I diagnose any form of “damage” in them, I had to decide between two routes: either sort myself out to deal with the situation (i.e learn to manage it) or get out. Looking at the personal growth gains I had made over the years and the worsening state of my employer, I decided on the latter. It was time to go and there was no looking back.

Step 2: Self-appraisal and review of priorities

After deciding it would be in my best interests to leave, I decided to do a lot of introspection in which I tried to answer one question: WHAT DO I WANT? Asking yourself this question from time to time is important as it would keep you in touch with what your priorities in life are as well as the kinds of sacrifices required to pursue those priorities. Over a number of weeks I spent hours alone mulling over this question and recorded my thoughts in a journal. After long debates with my inner voice I came up with the following list of value-guided priorities in no particular order:

- **Family:** My wife and children are the reason for my existence and all decisions in my life are determined by value to them.
- **Money:** Money is a survival tool we all cannot afford to live without and its role in determining our quality of life cannot be understated. Access to financial wealth is a determinant of the quality of life of families for generations to come.
- **Good health:** My state of health (mental and physical) is very important as the quality of life I would afford for my family would depend on it. My poor health would compromise my family's state of spiritual health just as my good health would promote their spiritual health and ultimately their quality of life. Good health would also enable me to have many productive years of providing for my family.
- **Professional excellence:** My success in my profession is the tool of access to productive capacity and my family's happiness depends a lot on it. Achieving my professional goals of being the best psychologist I can be is the highest motivator in my life and a lot of my other achievements are intricately linked to it.
- **Friends:** My life is blessed with some of the best people to ever walk this planet. Looking back on my life, I can see the roles played by these good people in shaping who I would become and the joy they bring to my life is incalculable. In many instances these friends have become an extension of my family. A good quality of life would mean I am able to sustain these good relationships.
- **Travel:** My family and I are lovers of travel and the outdoors and our travel bucket list is endless. Opportunities to travel are exploited to the full and we value the positive memories that are an outcome of travels and that is what strengthens our bond.

I came up with these as my priorities in life guided by my values of what I consider *a good life*.

The next step was to prioritise these priorities and I performed the following simple exercise. I paired each of these priorities with the other five to determine which was most important. For example, in the first step I paired family with money and had to decide which was most important, then family with good health, family with professional excellence and so on. The second step was to pair money with each of the other priorities and decide which one was most important. I did that pairing with all the priorities and, in the end, added up the tallies that each value collected in the process (it would be easier for me to demonstrate the procedure in any readers are interested).

In the end my list of value-driven priorities was as follows:

1. Good health
2. Family
3. Professional excellence
4. Money
5. Friends
6. Travel

The next question to ask myself was: *Is my work environment facilitating or endangering my pursuit of these priorities?* Again careful introspection told me the work environment was doing a lot of harm. Most importantly, I observed that I was spending most of my miserable time at an environment that contributed to priority Number 4 in my life. *Was it really worth it?* My pursuit of priority Number 4 was ruining my chances of achieving my other priorities.

After doing careful analysis of my financial affairs with the help of my financial advisor, we came to the conclusion that I would be able to settle all my big debts in less than a year and be in a position to leave.

And that is what happened. Now all my major debts (house and vehicles) have been paid off and I managed to leave the harmful environment at the end of May 2014.

Step 3: Psychological self-preparation and preparation of the family

When all the homework in Step 3 had been done I then talked with my wife and showed her all the facts. She supported my decision. Then came the children. In that corner the news was greeted with great shock, especially on learning that Daddy would make less money and would no longer afford some of the luxuries they had grown used to. However, they did not dispute the fact that Daddy needed his sanity back.

Once the “clearance” was obtained from the family, I became steadfastly focused on getting rid of my debt and started living “small” (i.e as if I was earning half what I earned). Making that transition almost a year in advance was very important as it ensured a smooth transition to the new living circumstances. It

is important that once you have decided that an event is a *turning point* that you make the psychological transition to the future state. This will make sure that it does not become a shock when you get to the *leap of faith* step.

Step 4: Taking the leap of faith

Once all self-appraisal and all the mental preparation had been done and I got to a stage where the financial obligations were shifted aside, I then took a *leap of faith*. I call it thus because it was not easy making that final move. I became obsessed with fear and self-doubt, questioning whether it was the right decision of not and praying that I would not live to regret it.

Call it a prayer, call it a dream, call it anything; I stood on the edge of the cliff and jumped!

That was a leap of faith because I knew I did something that was good for me and I was filled with hope. I had to confront my fears and developed the courage to move on. I was constantly reminded of a guest long ago on Oprah Winfrey's show who said "*Courage is not an absence of fear. It is the will to go on in spite of fear*". Those words came back to encourage me.

I knew I was finally free and I had my voice back.

Epilogue

Now my life has taken a different turn. After leaving my job (I now refer to it as *that place*) I took a month off to "unplug" – that means I did not work for a month. I took a break to cleanse my soul before moving to a new work environment. I went on holiday alone to the Drakensberg and hiked alone for two whole days before going to the South Coast to spend a few more days with a dear friend. I came back home to be a "house husband", sat around doing nothing, fixing a few things, picking up the children from school, visiting a few friends, running errands for my wife and just being me. I then realised how being at *that place* had taken a lot from me. Now I was restoring myself to being the-best-version-of-myself. It was good to be alone at home just sitting and cleansing my soul. I even managed to listen to some of the old songs I had not heard for a few years. I was on the road to being myself again. I even lost 2kg in the first two weeks of leaving.

I now work at a government academic hospital seeing patients. I look forward to the academic career that beckons every day. Each day I can see expressions of gratitude on people's faces – both patients and colleagues. I feel I am on my way to being the best version of myself. I have made the best of my *Turning Point*. These days when I get into bed I smile before I sleep. When I get up in the morning, I am filled with hope for the day ahead. I spend my day making a difference in people's lives and being appreciated for it. Every now-and-then I spare a thought for the good people who are still trapped at *that place*.

Psychology textbooks say we go through a phase of depression when we go through change. Well, I have not experienced that yet. As they say, I will cross that bridge when I get to it.

And what did I learn from all this? One thing: Life is crazy and we must learn to deal with its craziness. While some of the things life throws our way are beyond our control, WE ARE NOT VICTIMS. We always have the power of choice and must strive to make the best choices for our circumstances.

I made my choice and shall take the consequences of my choice on the chin.

You could also reach, or have already experienced, a turning point of your own; when you have decided enough is enough. I want you to learn from my own journey that when enough is enough, you can and should examine your life and make preparations to take a *leap of faith*. It can be done.

HAVE FAITH IN YOURSELF. THE REST WILL FALL IN PLACE.