

THE MOMENT MY LIFE CHANGED



CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH

A resource for the book **THE POWER OF MOMENTS**

BACKGROUND

In September 2016, we published a newsletter describing a phenomenon called the “crystallization of discontent,” which refers to a sudden jolt of emotion that comes when someone’s concerns and misgivings suddenly stitch together into a clear pattern.

We asked readers to reply with their own stories of realizations, epiphanies, and “crystallization of discontent” moments. We were astonished to receive over 400 replies.

In this document, we have curated a collection of 26 of those stories. We’ve grouped the stories according to 4 themes that were consistently reflected in the submissions. But, other than identifying those themes, we have intentionally resisted the urge to “explain” these stories, or to comment on them.

There’s something magical about being invited into a stranger’s life and being able to eavesdrop on a moment that changed their life.

THEME 1

THE POWER OF EXPOSURE

Often people can trace a major life decision back to a moment when they were exposed to something. They saw something. They experienced something. And suddenly, they knew: I want that. Or, alternatively, I don't want that.

What's interesting is that this realization—about the power of exposure—can be flipped into a practical strategy. If we're searching for insight, we need to give ourselves maximum exposure to new situations and people and experiences.

The insights we seek are far more likely to be found in the world than in our heads.

Chris Haugen

In 1990, I was working at the Pentagon. A Navy lieutenant, I had completed a three-and-a-half year assignment on my first submarine. For a few reasons I had determined I would be leaving the Navy after my current stint at the Pentagon was completed. My plan was to use my “shore tour” to obtain a Masters degree and to spend time on my transition.

One of my Masters degree program classmates was an executive with a large and well-known global personnel consulting group. He began to recruit me. Over the course of several weeks, we had many conversations and a couple lunches.

The lightning bolt moment came when I visited their offices in northwest Washington D.C. The building was new and modern--polished granite, glass and steel. Beautiful pieces of art, and very well-dressed people looking important and busy. I was impressed. The enterprise and the people who worked there looked affluent and I thought I wanted to be a part of that. Indications were that I could be if I so chose, and that I would be well compensated for joining the team.

However, over the next several days, I found I was leaning just the opposite way. I knew that turning my back on submarine service meant I would leave the exciting life and lifestyle of being in the Navy behind. The corporate world was too quiet and too boring. I realized in spite of the hardships that had led me to plan my transition, I loved the Navy and Submarine Service. I loved directing a watch team underwater on important missions.

I had been on the verge of resigning my commission. Instead, I signed up for another tour and I never regretted that decision. I ultimately served for 25 years, commanded a submarine and now look back with immense satisfaction on that decision and the path it led me down. That afternoon tour of a Washington DC office building was my lightning bolt moment.

Jim Dillon

I was a special education teacher and loved doing that type of teaching. I aspired to become a special education administrator and got my certification in that field. After a few years, I got the administrative job I had always wanted: a special education supervisor.

My classrooms however were spread out over many buildings due to the nature of how services were delivered. I had a great staff but it was frustrating to get all of them together to work as a team. Up until that point of my career, even though I was certified to be any type of education administrator, I had clearly decided that I never wanted to be a building principal for general education. I didn't want to have to worry about the physical building, PTA meetings, assemblies etc. Special education allowed me to be primarily student centered.

When I finally got the job I aspired to, I thought my career was set, but something was lacking, something I couldn't put my finger on. One of the classes I supervised was located in an elementary school. I had gotten to know the principal and was impressed with the job he did. One day I saw him walking down the hallway next to one of his teachers, she must have been having a tough time with some problem or student. As they got halfway down the hallway, I saw him briefly and gently place a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

At that moment, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to be building principal. I was missing the sense of community that came with living and working in the same place and time with other educators -- I knew that if I had that sense of community I could deal with the other things that came with the job.

Soon after that epiphany, a job opening appeared unexpectedly in an elementary school that I knew of and liked. I applied (the only principal job I ever applied for) got the job and stayed there 17 years until I retired. I have taken the lessons that I have learned from building a learning community in a building and in my "retirement" have written three books on the topic of creating a positive school climate. I also offer professional development for school leaders. I can trace everything back to the moment of a gentle hand on a teacher's shoulder.

Jim Rollins

For me it was in January, 1978. I had just finished my freshman semester of a pre-law degree. In high school, I was a successful debater, salutatorian, student counsel president and football team captain. And I didn't have a clue about what I wanted to be. I picked pre-law because it seemed like a good idea and sounded good to folks who asked.

The college I attended carved out a three-week period between first and second semesters for something called "Jan Term". You got an automatic three credits as long as you signed up for something. It was intended to encourage you to explore areas outside of your major. The computer department had received a grant to purchase a Xerox 4051 mini computer and offered a class in using it as a Jan Term offering. I thought, why not?

It changed my life. I was the only one who signed up so I had that thing all to myself. They set it up in the basement of the science building. I spent 16 hours a day for the whole three-week period just playing with it. I learned that silly thing inside and out and decided that's what I wanted to do.

I continued working on that thing months after the class ended. The room wasn't needed for anything else so they just let me keep using it. The college didn't have a computer science program but they taught some computer classes and I added a whole bunch of business classes and independent studies to round out a Bachelor of Science in Business degree. I graduated magna cum laude. I wrote programs for the alumni department and worked part time at the city water department. A paper salesman there hooked me up with a company that needed a guy so I had a top rate job waiting for me on graduation.

I'm 58 now and I've had a wonderful life as a programmer / general purpose computer guy. And I trace it all back to the 4051 in the basement of a science building.

I'm a Christian so I don't make a big deal about coincidences and fate. It is just really fun to be on the receiving end of providence.

Anonymous

After 17 years as a speech-language pathologist, I had grown frustrated in the career. (In addition, my marriage was failing, which may or may have contributed to my dissatisfaction.) I knew I possessed many skills of use to potential employees, but what? I had been “isolated” throughout my career in hospitals, clinics and schools; I had inadequate exposure to other types of work and industries.

That year, 1997, my employer -- a U.S. Dept. of Defense Dependent school in Panama -- chose me to represent the DoD at a national conference of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association in Boston. I found myself curious with questions like, “How did they know how many chairs to set up in that room?” And “How did they know how much water to put out on that table?” I thought, “Bingo. They must have people that coordinate those kinds of things.”

I returned home and researched job titles: Conference planner, event coordinator, etc. I honed in on those. Networked with the nascent internet. Found a friend who found a friend who knew someone putting on an event that needed help. I used my summer to work for no pay, and the international disabled sailing event was a huge success. I continued to network and landed a job as a conference planner with the event’s title sponsor. I took the risk, moved back to the U.S.

Since then (1998), I’ve leveraged my skills to change jobs four times and currently love my job as a Communications Manager for a high-tech division of a Fortune 100 company. It all started with an epiphany in Boston in 1997.

Anonymous

I had graduated from college with a degree in Education -- not because I always wanted to be a teacher (I hadn't wanted that since about the age of 8) but because it seemed like a practical degree to have. You can go anywhere and teach, right?

Four years after graduation, I had two small children and wanted to get a job. My husband was a teacher, and there were two positions open in one small school district that we could fill. We applied and were hired! Yippee, I got my first real job!

I struggled almost immediately. I didn't know how to make realistic lesson plans or good tests. I didn't like dealing with students who made trouble or who didn't want to learn. I didn't know how to relate to the parents, all of whom were older than I. I had trouble sleeping; I worried incessantly. I took to escaping to the teacher's lounge during my one free period of the day. It was the only hour of the day I enjoyed and looked forward to.

One day there was a visitor in the teacher's lounge. She was introduced as being a representative from a court reporting school in a major nearby city. I had never heard of a court reporter, but within 10 minutes I knew that's what I should be! I had that excitement you feel when you know you've found something that fits.

I finished out the school year, and started court reporting school two weeks later. It was the best, most rewarding job I ever had, and I don't know if it would ever have happened if that woman hadn't happened to be in the teacher's lounge at just the right time for me to meet her. But I've always realized, too, that my absolute loathing of the job I was in was a necessary step for me to find what was right for me. Sad but true.

Matthew Reif

My lightning-bolt moment came to me when I was a sophomore at Auburn University, studying journalism in pursuit of becoming a sports writer. I wasn't hating my classes, but I wasn't necessarily enjoying them either. I kept thinking to myself, "These journalism classes are dry and boring, but being a sports writer is going to be engaging and exciting."

I was working as an equipment manager for the Auburn baseball team and was able to connect with the team's beat writer. He let me sit in the press box with him and try to write my own stories. I was kind of enjoying it because I love baseball, but a lot of the time I found myself wishing I could just enjoy the game and not have to worry about taking good notes for a story at the end of the game.

One of my journalism teachers brought a local sports writer into our class as a guest speaker to talk about what his career is like. I'm not sure if she was expecting this, but he talked almost the entire time about how much he hates his job. He also talked about how there is not much money in the career and how there's not a bright future in it because of how many people are willing to blog about sports for free. He mentioned stressful deadlines and terrible and long hours.

The end of that class was my lightning-bolt moment. I was struck with a deer-in-the-headlights look during my mile or so walk back to my apartment. Soon after I had a long conversation with my girlfriend (now wife) about this lightning-bolt moment. I wasn't ready to make the decision to pursue something else just yet, but I was much less sure than before that being a sports writer was the right career for me.

One thing that really stuck with me was thinking about potential outcomes. Even if I got my dream job of being a beat writer for the Cincinnati Reds someday, I wasn't sure if I'd be happy. I knew being present with my family would be very important to me, and I'd be on the road all the time if I got my dream job and likely always glued to my phone or laptop. And it'd be more likely that I'd get something I'd enjoy less and still lack a good work/life balance.

A few days later, I went to another Auburn baseball game with my laptop and knocked on the press box door to practice writing another story for the game. There's always someone at the door to check your credentials and let you in. There was no answer, so I waited ... knocked ... waited ... knocked ... and there was never an answer at the door. This felt like the final epiphany to me. God was letting me know that this door is shut. It was not the right path for me.

After that, I started thinking about the classes that I had actually enjoyed and naturally engaged me. It was easily my economics classes that interested me the most, and I loved math and business, so I changed my major to Economics with an Accounting minor. Now I work in quality assurance for a healthcare software company, which is not at all related to economics, but it's the perfect job for me and I'm loving it.

THEME 2

EXTRAPOLATING AHEAD

In these stories, people experience something in the present that compels them to shift their attention to the future. They imagine the experience repeating itself and they ask themselves: Can I endure more of this?

Leon Harris

Picture this: I was a 24 year old soon-to-be lawyer given conduct of a \$9 million dollar complex finance deal. This deal required the signatures of 10 different people in a variety of locations spread over a 100 miles or so. The deadline is Friday 4pm.

It is Friday at 3.45pm and I am on the phone to the lawyer representing one of the parties who blandly informs me that his client will not be signing the document (last signature required!). Supposedly because some minor formality had not been complied with.

Potential end result = deal would fall over = young lawyer(me) in all sorts of trouble.

I argue, cajole, beg (sort of.), threaten and eventually convince the other lawyer that his contention is, in fact and law, incorrect and at about five minutes to four, the paperwork is signed and the deal is done.

I hang up the phone. I am shaking. I feel nauseous. I am in a cold lather of stress-induced sweat. I put my head in my hands as I feel my heart thudding through my body. My secretary comes in and tells me I look terrible. Thanks :)

I think to myself, "There is no way on earth I want to do this for the next 40 years. It will kill me."

I hadn't been happy in the job for a while but this incident really brought home to me how much I hated what I was doing. Long story short, very shortly afterwards, I saw an ad in a magazine for ski-instructors(!) at a ski resort about 1000 miles away, called my girlfriend (now wife) and said, "I'm done - let's go." To her credit, she said yes and after a couple of ski seasons, a short stint back in law just to confirm that, yes I did in fact hate it, I ended up as a high school teacher, author and uni lecturer.

My crystallization of discontent was so immediate and obvious that I remember the feelings to this day 21 years later.

Anonymous

I was about a year and a half into working at MIT Lincoln Laboratory (MIT LL). At the last minute, I was pulled onto a special project to work around the clock to meet an aggressive deadline. My team had to develop applied research solutions that could be adopted in government -- without the benefit of knowing exactly what the agency was interested in. The scope of the agency was large and therefore the implementation of any idea would have had massive implications. Needless to say, this was a high stakes situation.

So, after hundreds of hours of preparation, we came up with multiple exhaustively-researched solutions. The day had come to present the government official funding this effort. After presenting our work, he showered us with praise, telling us how impressive the work was and how smart all the teams clearly were. He then followed up with something to the effect of: "There's no money to implement any of these projects."

That was my deathblow.

It was at that moment that I realized all I was doing (and had been doing for the past 1.5 years) was working really hard to produce slick presentations to impress Very Important People so they can pat us on the back, tell us how smart we were, and give us more money . . . just so we can work really hard to produce slick presentations to impress Very Important People so they can pat us on the back, and, give us more money. You get the picture: rinse, wash, repeat.

Having spent several years getting a Ph.D., those years seem wasted if all I was going to get for my effort was the equivalent of a yellow star and smiley face. It was this crystallization of discontent that made me leave MIT LL to join a startup in Silicon Valley in hopes of having a more meaningful impact on society. So far, my hope and hypothesis has held true.

Andy Erickson

I went to work at Boeing in 1989, with a very specific vision of the career I wanted to have. I worked hard, was promoted rapidly and was picked for a plum assignment on the yet-to-be-launched 777 program. I was on track to achieve my goals. But I wasn't happy. It took about seven or eight years to fully realize, "This place is a bit dull, and I'm not feeling enthused very often."

I stuck it out for another six years, bouncing from job to job, position to position. I was well-regarded and my growing experience made me a valuable team member. But I simply could not imagine how my skills and experience could translate into a job with a different company. I was comfortable. My salary was not extravagant, but the benefits were good, and I could succeed without working very hard. I was miserable.

My constant companion was, "How could I possibly leave?"

In 2005 I was asked to lead a team sent in sort out operations at a key a supplier. The job required / allowed my family and I to live in France for a year. Seeing the company from a distance, and through the eyes of the supplier, was a revelation. What had seemed like banal and tedious aspects of the Boeing culture began to seem pernicious and arrogant.

There came a night -- Feb 24 2006 to be precise -- when it occurred to me that the question I had been asking was wrong. It wasn't, "How could I possibly leave?" The better questions was, "How could I possibly stay?"

I'm not sure why the world changed on that particular night... I can't recall a specific event or conversation that precipitated the insight. But it was definitely a "dark night of the soul" and when I woke the next morning, I knew I had made up my mind. I was scared, but excited.

I didn't tell anyone. I didn't make any announcements. But within three weeks I received three calls, seemingly out of the blue, from former colleagues and classmates, each inquiring about my interest in positions with their firms. I accepted one of them and two months later, began my second career as a management consultant.

I am happy... and, more importantly, fulfilled by my new work. I get to use most of my skills and I have fun almost every day.

Anonymous

I joined one of the large auditing/consulting firms in the UK in the early 1970s (it was the Big 8 back then). I was one of the first women hired into a professional role in my office and I had a great experience, working in several different countries.

Ten years later I was on the track to partnership and it seemed like a huge honor to be so close to something that I couldn't have envisioned when I first graduated. There were still very few women partners in the firm. However, the closer I got to it, the more I started to question whether it was what I really wanted.

One afternoon I was in the office and a group of 5 or 6 partners returned from their 5-martini lunches. They were loud, drunk, and, I thought, arrogant. I asked myself then – would you be proud to have these men as your partners? To throw your financial and career future in with them?

The answer was clear – I would not. I started to plan my exit strategy and look for other opportunities. That was over 30 years ago. I've had a great career and I've never regretted my move.

THEME 3

OUT OF THE BLUE

What's fascinating about moments of insight is how suddenly and unexpectedly they can arrive. The people in these stories might have been considering their situations for some time. But their epiphanies come out of the blue. There are no specific experiences or questions that trigger their realizations. They appear, unbidden. And that's what makes these stories so much fun to read.

Anonymous

Sometime after my divorce, I met a man at a conference and spent 2 years in a long-distance relationship. I was in grad school at the time, and we saw each other in person as often as possible. As my graduation approached, we started talking about making our relationship permanent and I looked for positions in universities close to where he lived. The future seemed too bright and I was excited about it all! We even talked about the new furniture we would need/want, and, even though it was tough to be apart, it was fun to plan together.

Then one day, as I pulled into a parking lot at a local shopping center, I got a call from him. I sat in my car and listened to him describing the new dining room furniture he had spotted. It was beautiful, everything he had been looking for. The price was right, but he wasn't sure I would like the table. I pointed out that we could put a tablecloth over it. He pressed: Was I sure I wouldn't mind using a table cloth? He wanted to be sure I would like it. Did I like it? (This furniture I had never seen?)

I suddenly realized that I honestly didn't care about the dining set. It really didn't matter that much to me. More importantly, I realized that I really didn't like him that much!!

I was shocked, but as I broke up with him over the phone in a parking lot 6 states away, I felt such an amazing sense of relief. I never had one single moment of regret.

Justine F. Glynn, Captain, U. S. Navy, Retired

I had finished many years active duty Navy, and had been invited to join a company with a couple Navy colleagues. It was a sunny March day in Oakland, California. I was at my bare gray cubicle, staring at nothing but a phone, call scripts, and my contact list, when I looked out the window. Across the water was the San Francisco skyline and a shimmering bay. Near my building, I saw what appeared to be a school group on a field trip: two adults watching perhaps 30 children playing on the grass, waiting for a ferry to take them across San Francisco Bay.

I knew I should be with children, teaching.

This was something I had prepared myself for in college, before I had a similar ‘aha’ moment that led me to the Navy. I had been vaguely unhappy with the work - I loved the product but not the motivation of money that surrounded me.

Two weeks later I quit and made plans to move to where I could afford to live, and started graduate school in Elementary Education in June.

Anonymous

I always thought I was not the type of girl that would be married. I just thought it would not fit me and my personality. It is something everybody knew about me. I had a life partner for five years and was very sure that he and I would stay together for ever. We had talked about maybe getting married when we are old and crumpley so that we could get permission to visit each other in intensive care.

Then, we were in Java, Indonesia, for a trekking trip and one night we were enjoying this perfect balmy evening in the middle of the jungle. It was a moment of intense closeness and – I still think it was out of a whim – my now husband asked me to marry him.

And within a split second I said “yes”. It was not something I had to think about at all. In this moment I just knew that it was the right thing to do even though it contradicted all my previous beliefs.

And looking back I am still amazed by what happened that night. I made a life changing decision without thinking at all and I have never doubted it one second thereafter.

Mona Jensen

I was 4 years into a relationship that we had been trying to “fix” for 2 years. All kinds of strategies and solutions had been tried. I went on a trip to Hong Kong for 2 weeks to study martial arts – something I was very passionate about at the time. This was my first time in HK, and I learned so much about myself, and life, and the world. And I met a man there, and every conversation, every interaction was just so easy. The sharp contrast to my relationship was almost psychically painful to me. But I believed in my relationship and in FIXING™ it.

Being in Hong Kong was a nice break, but I was still constantly thinking about how to fix my relationship. It wasn't until I was on the flight heading home that it hit me. And it literally hit me: I knew right then and there, that we were a wrong match, and that we couldn't be fixed.

We were just two very different people, who wanted very different things. We had both entered the relationship on a different set of premises. I had changed career paths, and he had, 2 years prior, been diagnosed with ADHD. (When he started meds and became his normal self, we didn't function.) And then we spend two years trying to place the blame elsewhere, instead of facing up to the truth. We broke up 2 days after I returned home.

Now, I said before that it literally hit me. As I was sitting in the plane, it hit me that this relationship had no future, and it hit me so violently, I actually exclaimed DOH! And slapped my own forehead.

Yes, Homer Simpson indeed. I hope the other passengers weren't too alarmed.

Mark Friedman

I had been seeing a woman for several years and going nowhere. I had deep commitment issues and was terribly afraid of making a real commitment. She wanted to be with me but I was afraid it would not work out. She was a single mom with three kids and lived 1000 miles in a different state. This went on for several years.

One day, I woke up and realized my fear was gone. Just gone. I don't recognize any crystallizing moment. I waited a few days and the fear and anxiety of "Should I or should I not?" was truly gone. I was fearful it would return. So, while fear free, I proposed to her before the fear returned.

We were married 4 days later, that being the requirement to get a marriage license. I never looked back. One month later I moved to her existing house. I got 3 step-kids, two dogs and cats, and a suburban house with a mortgage.

We just celebrated our 14th year wedding anniversary. Life is good. It was the best decision of my life.

THEME 4

COMMENT STORIES

Many people can trace back major life transitions to a simple comment or question from another person. And that teaches us something: Our feedback has more force than we ever suspected. That's both inspiring and sobering. We should be thoughtful about our feedback, because a stray comment has the power to change a life, for better or worse.

Amy Dunn

I was in an Early Childhood Development program doing an internship at an on-campus daycare center. It served the families of professors and other University staff and provided training and experience-building opportunities for people in programs like mine (psychology, etc). I was getting my performance evaluation from one of the leaders of the facility and was crestfallen to hear that I was getting just a “meets” (vs. exceeds or exceptional) rating.

Her feedback to me was something like, “Amy, you’re terrific with the kids. You establish trust and rapport quickly, you encourage their curiosity and exploration, and you clearly take genuine delight in their learning and growth.” Sounds great, right? I sure thought so.

Until she added, “But while you’re engrossed in a learning point with one, you’re taking your eyes off another who may be about to fall off the swing set. Or another who is biting their friend. Or you didn’t get all of them to the potty before heading outside and you forgot to administer the medicine for one and sign all the forms required to do so. In many ways, working in a setting like this is as much about being an ‘operations manager’ of little people as it is about learning and teaching.”

It stung, but she articulated exactly why I was not loving the work the way I had expected to. I never wanted to be an operations manager of anything or anyone! And the fact that it paid barely above poverty wages was not helping.

I switched majors to Human Resources Management and after a very successful corporate career I am now consulting in the HR disciplines I love most - Training and Development, Coaching, Team Building, and Organizational Effectiveness. At the core of all of these things is teaching and bringing out the best in people by tapping into their highest potential -- which is exactly what my goal was as an undergrad hoping to work in a daycare center!

Emmy Miller

I am a management consultant. I have been in business since May of 1980. For years we in the practice, including myself, did many different types of assignments. I have a client organization that required me to leave very early in the morning, travel some distance, work long hours and return back late. Upon returning from one particularly long day, my husband remarked that he couldn't understand how I had so much energy after having such a long, intense day of work.

As it seemed counter-intuitive, I decided to start tracking my energy level and mood more closely to see if I could figure out why I maintained my energy level despite the long hours. I realized that the energy levels were not always high after long days, but only on days when I had intense, one-one-one coaching sessions. In these sessions I was able to help my clients have breakthrough moments that enabled them to achieve their goals. My ability to have impact on their success not only energized me, but I found my creativity exploding. No matter how many hours I worked I didn't feel either physical or mental fatigue.

As a result, I made a decision that I would focus my practice predominantly on coaching individuals and teams. This realization that my energy was a function of my ability to help my clients achieve their goals has had a significant positive impact not only for my clients, but for my business and my life.

Suzanne Zick

My lightning bolt moment came when I was nearing the end of my first semester in college. I was a history major with the goal of attending law school after graduation. Although I was doing well in my history course and actually enjoyed history as a topic, I felt unchallenged by the material and was unenthusiastic about the idea of having to attend law school on top of earning a 4-year degree. In addition to the history class, I was taking typical freshman courses like Freshman English, 1st year French, and Intro Geology to satisfy my science requirement. I wasn't miserable, just unsatisfied.

One day, I was leafing through the college course catalog considering other potential options for a major, when my roommate returned from class. She wanted to know what I was doing, and when I explained, she said instantly, "You should become a Geology major. You talk about that course all the time."

Lightning bolt! Until that moment, I had not even considered geology; and she was right -- I used to come back from class and share cool geology topics from the day.

Long story short, I changed my major to geology the next day and never looked back. I attended graduate school in geology, worked as an applied geologist for decades, and I still love the field.

Milena Dabova

I am currently a performer in a multidisciplinary theatre company - I act, sing, dance, fly through the air, and I am part of creating the parts that I play. I love what I do. But 8 years ago, when I was 24, I was on the path to a career in psychology, thinking that that would be the sensible choice, the thing that was available and achievable for me. I had danced, moved, performed for a lot of my life and double-majored in psychology and dance but after graduating from college it never crossed my mind that I could pull off a life as a performer.

Psychology, which had also been a significant interest of mine, was the sensible thing to pursue. I was in the US on a student visa and after graduating I applied for work in the neuroscience department of a hospital and I got the job. The hospital was going to apply for a work visa for me and I was going to move to Boston with my then-boyfriend. But at that very moment I was doing an internship with the theatre company that I am now working with and I created a small piece of performance work that felt very meaningful to me. Even so, I continued with the visa and job process at the hospital.

But soon after showing the piece to the company, the theatre director asked me into her office and told me that if I want to be an artist I should be one. She said that I would be miserable doing something else and lying to myself. I spent the next two hours crying because her words expressed something I had felt but never had the guts to say to myself until then.

I understood that art is what I am yearning and have been yearning to do but had been afraid to pursue due to my uncertainty in myself. I understood that I was making someone else's choices for my life, it was not my life that I was about to live. I ended up saying no to the hospital job, running out of my visa, breaking up with the boyfriend and going back to my home country where I created a full performance piece based on the nugget I had begun.

Years later I returned to the US to study with and ultimately join the theatre company that I work with now. It has been a long process of approaching who I am but that moment in the director's office made the direction crystal clear in a way I could not deny and set me on the path that I am on now.

Michael McGuire

In 1986 I was a 23 year old police officer. I was just out of the military and like most at that age thought I could run through walls. Nothing seemed impossible. I was walking through the police station one morning and saw a job posting on the bulletin board. They were looking for instructors at the local Police Academy. I hadn't taught before but had some leadership experience from my time in the Air Force so I thought, "Why not?"

I applied and landed the position. My first day in the classroom was filled with anxiety. Would I do a good job? Would they accept me? Would they pay attention?

Immediately following the class one of the veteran officers - probably 25+ years on the job - approached me and said, "Great job kid. You're a natural." I was hooked.

Somehow, based on that singular data point, I was convinced I was a teacher. I continued to teach at the academy for the next 8 years. During that time I went back to school and eventually earned a doctoral degree. In 1998 I left law enforcement for a career in teaching and haven't looked back.

When people ask me how I found teaching I say, "I didn't. Teaching found me."

Heather K. Smith

The moment when I knew something WASN'T working was triggered by a frozen breakfast food. When one of our children asked me to buy Pillsbury Toaster Strudels, I told them that they required TOO MANY STEPS.

I actually said that toasting the pastries and then SQUEEZING A TUBE OF ICING would take too long during our busy mornings.

As soon as I heard the words come out of my mouth, I knew I had to make some serious changes.

I ultimately went part-time at my job, going to work after the kids had left for school (with real breakfasts in their bellies), and returning each day in time to meet their bus. I had been feeling stressed and conflicted about our chaos for years, but the grocery store incident crystallized everything for me.

Anonymous

After retiring from the Air Force, returning to college, and trying on a few other jobs, I became an Air Force defense contractor. Within about three years I had four different jobs (it is a bit cutthroat & contracts sometime terminate without renewal). Each of the four jobs came with a pay raise and I was making good money. I was also putting in 60-hour work weeks.

Over time I became really dissatisfied with supporting the military-industrial complex, not helping the troops, nor saving any taxpayer dollars in the process. One Thursday evening I was filing out my WAR (Weekly Activity Report) at home [a report to justify my paycheck] after attending a local defense contractor conference showcasing all the latest offerings for the various military services. I was on schedule to be at another out-of-town conference the following week and I was not in the best of moods.

My wife, who was on her way to bed, said, “You look miserable.”

I said, “I feel miserable.”

At that point, she looked me straight in the eye and said, “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

And -- WHAM, like an epiphany -- I replied, “You are absolutely right, I do NOT have to do this work.”

I stayed up all night writing briefing notes on all my work projects and went to work at 4:00am to pack up all my stuff and organize everything for my boss. I ambushed him when he came in and said I quit, no notice, and have a nice day.

He wanted me to stay on and had corporate call me with enticing new salary and benefit offerings. But I was done.

It took my wife to break through my mindset of “working a good job is better than enjoying your work.” After I left, I tried attending some school and several entrepreneurial endeavors but to date I still haven’t figured out what I want to be when I grow up.

THEME 5

CONTENTMENT STORIES

In the final theme, we explore the opposite of the crystallization of discontent: moments of peace or contentment or resolve. Moments when people suddenly realize: I'm right where I'm supposed to be.

May you experience many of these moments in your life.

Shane Sullivan

I looked for years for fulfillment in my work. My current position as outreach minister for a medium-sized church in San Antonio, Texas, began in 2012. From the very beginning my goal was to find a weekly gathering of unchurched people who were genuinely interested in learning about Christianity. I didn't know how to find or create such a gathering – it seemed almost impossible -- but I thought I might possibly begin a neighborhood study group or a campus discussion club at a local college. I really wasn't sure what it would look like, but I had a dream.

In 2014 I started serving at a local drug and alcohol rehabilitation center. I had no previous experience or interest in this kind of ministry, but was invited by a friend. I went to be polite. I visited off and on for over two years before I suddenly realized that I was doing exactly what I had been wanting to do. I had found my dream.

I still remember exactly where I was sitting at the lunch table when it hit me: This is it! I had found it. A deep sense of satisfaction hit me that had stayed with me to this day.

I think because the mode of delivery (via a rehab center) was not what I had expected, it took me longer to recognize it. But once I did, I felt like my dream had come true. The realization hit me in an instant--all the signs came together and I woke up and realized what I had found.

Anonymous

It was 2001. I had started summer training at West Point a couple weeks prior and had been doing all the things you might expect (or not expect?): stressful inspections, memorizing minutiae, physical training, etc. I had begun to have gnawing doubts about whether or not I wanted to stick with what I was doing, made more difficult by the fact that I had a long-term girlfriend back home, my friends were still enjoying their summer, and this was all pre-9/11, so West Point was basically just a well-educated path into the Army.

Then one afternoon I was marching in a formation and we were going through the tunnel under Thayer Road (I can still visualize myself there fifteen years later). At that moment I knew I wasn't going to quit.

I don't recall the specific thoughts as much as the overall surety, but it was some mix of realizing the stress wasn't personal, it wasn't about me, I could hack it, etc. After that, things got easier. :-)

I served in the Army for five years after graduating and got out when I wanted to start a family, go to grad school, and change career paths. Looking back though, I'm absolutely positive I made the right decision in going to West Point, and were I 18 and fresh out of high school once more, I would do it all again in a heartbeat.

Rick Fink

I began working part time in my local municipal cemetery the summer of 1996. It was a great summer job as I was attending grad school to get my Master of Public Administration. In 1999, I went from part-time to FTE status. I had never understood why I liked my job so much. In fact, there was a time I truly questioned my sanity as I was watching a casket lower into the ground. I distinctly remember asking myself, “how screwed up am I that I like my job so much?”

Fast-forward a few years. I had been working with a family located out-of-state via the internet on grave locations of their family members as they were conducting a big family genealogy project. Over the course of the next three consecutive summers, I personally met with the family and located/escorted them to the ancestral resting places. Having done this for three years, I got to know the grave locations, the family, and their

family stories quite well.

A few summers later, I was mowing a part of the cemetery and was watching a small group of people placing flowers/grave decorations on various headstones. As I watched, I noticed them place some flowers on a headstone that I had shown the out-of-state family each year they were here.

Curiosity captured me, and I had to ask the small group if they knew the people in the group I had helped earlier. They responded that they had not heard of them, and I explained the connection. They asked if I could put them in contact, and I agreed to do so if the out-of-state family agreed.

I contact the original family, and they were elated as they had heard of that branch of the family, but had no idea where or how to contact. Long story short (too late, I know), the two families were connected.

To this day, I can remember the joy I heard in that phone call, and it hit me like Thor’s hammer. It wasn’t the job that I liked so much, it was the ability to be able to connect people -- to other family members or to their history. Right then, I knew I was exactly where I was best suited. A place where I can make a real difference in somebody’s world.

Rebecca Garland-Zaleschuk

I was at the gym on Monday morning. It was 7:30 and I just finished training. One of the usual ladies that pass like ships gave her “good day” to me on her way out.

“Have a good day,” she said.

“You too,” I said. (pretty typical).

And then she said, “For sure. The worst part of my day is now over, so it’s all good.”

And then the following tumble came from my head. I’ll leave it rambling, cause that’s how it happened:

Wow; the gym is her worst part of the day? That’s too bad.

Wait, the gym is the BEST part of my day.

So, she likes WORK better than the gym? Really?

Ok, actually wait. Work is pretty good for me too. It’s not the worst part of my day either.

Home is awesome.

There is no worst part of my day!

Yep. That’s it. Yes, I have bad moments. Bad days. But nothing endemic to my life.

But still the crystallization ... I HAVE NO WORST PART OF MY DAY!?!?!?! How fortunate am I?

APPENDIX

THE CUBICLE EPIPHANY

One day in the spring of 1999, Julie Kasten's career aspirations shifted in an instant. She was sitting in her cubicle at the time, eavesdropping on the woman in the neighboring cube.

Kasten, 24, was working for a well-respected consulting firm in Washington, DC. She had joined the firm about 18 months earlier, attracted by the chance to work in marketing communications. The cubicle next to her was reserved for the use of out-of-town executives while they were visiting the DC office. Kasten didn't know the woman who was using the cube that day. Nevertheless, the woman changed her life.

"She was smartly attired... Blue pantsuit. Well-tailored. Polished. She stuck out among the other visitors," said Kasten. "She was on the phone pretty much for the duration of her stay. And what struck me was her enthusiasm.

"I knew she was looking at the blank walls around her—same as mine. But she was so skillful at what she was doing, and obviously enjoying herself."

It occurred to Kasten that the woman was doing the same job she would be doing if she were promoted a few times from her current role.

Kasten's next thoughts came as a jolt.

If that's what success in this role sounds like, I don't want it. She's energized by what she's talking about. But it bores me to death.

"I imagined myself wanting to be like she was. But talking about something else,"

said Kasten.

At that moment, she knew she would quit her job.

She was too sensible to quit on the spot, but she began plotting her exit. A few months later, she visited a career counselor, hoping to discover a career that better suited her interests. That's when her life shifted a second time.

The counselor listened to her aspirations and offered some tools—personality tests and skills assessments—to clarify the kind of work she wanted to do. Armed with this data, the counselor suggested to Kasten a few careers that might fit her. But Kasten had already decided. She remembers looking at the counselor, thinking, I like your job. I want to do what you do.

By the fall of 1999, Kasten was enrolled in graduate school for counseling. As of 2016, she had been a career counselor for 14 years.

It took only two lightning-bolt moments to shape Kasten's career. Neither one was planned, and neither one was foreseen. They just happened, and in an instant, her life was different.

How can such big shifts happen so quickly? The psychologist Roy Baumeister studied people like Kasten who experience sudden life changes. He described what she experienced, sitting in her cubicle that day, as the “crystallization of discontent,” a moment when an array of concerns and misgivings were suddenly stitched together.

She'd had doubts about her position before, vague feelings of dissatisfaction. But she would argue against herself: “It's a good job, it pays well, what's my problem?” So the doubts never cohered—that is, until the day she eavesdropped on a woman in the neighboring cube and—BOOM—she suddenly knew. This isn't for me. Notice that nothing about her job had changed. She wasn't demoted or demeaned by a supervisor or given unfair assignments. She wasn't reacting to a change in circumstances. She was reacting to a change in thinking.

Baumeister's point is that it's the linkage among the dissatisfactions that is new in the moment of crystallization. All the clues were there before, but as long as they stayed isolated from each other, they didn't spark action.

Baumeister said that the crystallization of discontent often precedes divorce: “Marital breakup seems to show a similar pattern. Initially, marital dissatisfaction is felt and expressed in terms of specific and often minor problems. Instead of saying ‘I am not satisfied with our marriage,’ the person criticizes the partner's actions in many individual, particular ways. Later, however, the person comes to see the prob-

lems and dissatisfactions as part of a global pattern.”

Baumeister did not study the opposite phenomenon: a “crystallization of contentment” (or satisfaction, perhaps). But that’s exactly what seemed to happen to Kasten, later, in the career counselor’s office: a sudden stitching-together of the clues that she was well-suited for the life of a counselor.

Note to our newsletter readers: Have you experienced a sudden moment of insight like these? A moment that felt like a crystallization of discontent or a crystallization of contentment? We have grown interested in these sudden realizations and are gathering stories as part of our research. If this topic struck a chord with you, will you share your story with us? You can follow this link and send it to us. We will read every one personally – we don’t have ‘minions.