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CRCRTH 688

May 18, 2015

Transformative Time Management:

Appreciating Meaning in the Present as a

Base for Reflective Exploration of Future Opportunity

This paper chronicles the creation of a reflective practice, changes that I made to the practice during the spring term of 2015, and my plan to redefine and continue the practice into the future.

At the beginning of the spring term, I was faced with a situation concerning my career. I work for Parsons School of Design, which is a division of The New School in New York City. A reorganization of academic advising staff is currently underway throughout the university. Advisors who work within each division of The New School will become part of a centralized Center for Student Success. I was told that I would be demoted. I will retain my salary, but the scope of my work will change. I will not supervise staff anymore, and I will not work with study abroad programming anymore. I felt that this change was unsatisfactory, and decided to engage in a job search. I began looking for a new job in September 2014. I decided to create a reflective practice related to my job search. I wanted to work smarter and be more intentional and mindful regarding the way I spent my time. Specifically, I wanted to address the time I had outside of the 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. workday, Monday through Friday. I wanted to refrain from sabotaging my job search by procrastinating, second-guessing myself, and dwelling in a fearful state. I intended to limit my use of Facebook. I had been spending several hours on weekend mornings poring through Facebook to read about my friends' lives and to read news stories that they had posted.

In addition to limiting Facebook usage, my new practice initially involved weekly list making and time tracking. I made lists of the assignments I needed to do for school -- and I listed the jobs that I would like to apply for. Initially, I ranked both the assignments and the jobs by priority and due date. I used the Toggl time-tracking app to record how I used my time. Toggl allows a user to create different categories of activities to track. I created categories for exercise, family time, housekeeping, financial management, job search, course work, and Facebook. I added the following activities to the practice as it morphed, expanded, and evolved:  
- Meditation  
- Daily journaling for reflection  
- Writing specific gratitude statements within my journaling  
- Scheduling my time a week in advance  
- Exercise

* Using the Unstuck.com App
* Re-reading the book *The Four Agreements*: *A Practical Guide to Personal Freedom* by Don Miguel Ruiz  
  - A support group of critical friends/learning partners  
  - Attendance at a class called the Ultimate Self-Confidence Class for Women

I saw that during the semester, some initial components of my practice fell away, as they were no longer important:

- Time-tracking with Toggl

- The Smartsheet and Asana time-scheduling apps. I chose to create a weekly schedule with a simple Excel document.

- The ranking of tasks by priority and due date. These became part of my scheduling   
- The importance of Facebook. It helped that I restricted access to it by deleting the app from my phone.

CONFRONTATION OF SELF THROUGH REFLECTION

Confronting the self is one of the essential components of reflection. Through my journaling and conversations with critical friends and learning partners, I confronted my habits, recurring thoughts, and beliefs. I saw that my practice grew from a focus on my time outside the workday to encompass all of my time. Confrontation of myself regarding time management, health management, and my job search led to the following breakthroughs:  
1. I fought wasting time by reframing how I view time. I now see it as a precious resource.  
2. I fought the urge to please others by offering to do things. Realized I was offering to do things without thinking about how much time something would take, and how the new unplanned commitment impacted things I had already committed to do.   
3. I learned to say "no." This opened up time for what matters most to me -- my family. And, it allowed me focus on what I had already committed to do.  
4. I continually reminded myself of lessons I learned in the Ultimate Self Confidence class for women, which I took during the semester.  
5. I used the Unstuck.com app to work through fears. In doing so, I learned more about the source of those fears.

By observing myself and reflecting upon my actions and thoughts in my journal, I learned the following about myself:  
1. Multi-tasking doesn't work for me  
2. Single-tasking does work for me  
3. My job search slowed down with the demands of my current job, two classes, and maintaining meaningful relationships with my husband and children.  
4. Sometimes I take a very long time to reflect on whether I want to apply for an opportunity. Then, I take a long time to contemplate the framing of the application letter.  
5. I found that I was fooling myself with activity. For instance, I found an interesting job to apply for, yet I spent 90 minutes continuing to look at job listings posted on LinkedIn or Indeed. I should have used those 90 minutes to write a letter for the one interesting job I found.  
6. I need to focus on completion. It's not useful to start five things. I need to focus on and complete one thing -- then move on to the next thing.

7. I need to engage in activities that lead somewhere.  
8. I took on things without thinking about the time commitment and the consequences.  
9. Initiating is important. Once I take an action to get something started, I find that I am in the process. It sounds very elementary, but I have to put one foot in front of the other.

During my presentation, on May 5, I explained that through my practice, I learned during the semester that a transformational and important practice for me must include the following elements:

* Daily journaling for reflection, including specific gratitude statements
* Scheduling my time a week in advance and buffering time commitments
* Exercising
* Meditation
* Using the Unstuck App and reading blog posts on unstuck.com
* Relying on a support group of critical friends/learning partners
* Learning to say “no” – refraining from over-committing myself
* Learning to say “yes” and taking a risk
* Getting up and moving during the work day to replenish my energy
* Going outside during the work day
* Looking around and seeing something new
* Thanking people for things
* Reminding myself over and over to keep returning to my practice – and to keep returning my focus to my breath

After my presentation, a member of the audience asked how I would keep up with so many new requirements of myself. I have pondered her question. I think that with too rigid a structure with too many requirements, my practice may gradually decline into disorder – or a lack of a practice. Because I have found the practice to be so helpful to me, I wanted to figure out how to sustain it into the future. I’ve realized that I need to simplify my practice. And, saw that I needed to define the practice differently.

Evolution of Plan for Practice

I have defined my future plan of practice with three elements: an ongoing core primary practice, an ongoing secondary practice, and a finite tertiary practice. The ongoing core primary practice involves time management and wellness. I plan to engage in this core practice for the foreseeable future. The core practice consists of the following elements:

* Daily journaling for reflection, including specific gratitude statements
* Scheduling my time a week in advance and buffering time commitments
* Exercising
* Meditation
* Weekly check-ins on Saturday morning to look back at the past week, assess how I’ve done, and remind myself to return to my practice if I have strayed or fallen away from it

After listening to my classmate Ray Symonds’ presentation, I realized that his weekly check-ins on Fridays make a lot of sense. I have incorporated Ray’s idea into my core primary practice. But, for me, Saturday morning is the best time for a reflective check-in looking back at the previous week.

My ongoing secondary practice provides as-needed support for the primary practice. I will call upon the activities, tools, and supports, as I find that I need to or want to engage with them:

* Calling upon individual members of my support group of critical friends/learning partners
* Using the Unstuck App and reading blog posts on unstuck.com
* Saying “no” to refrain from over-committing myself
* Saying “yes” and taking a risk
* Getting up and moving during the work day to replenish my energy
* Going outside during the work day
* Looking around and seeing something new
* Thanking people for things

My finite tertiary practice involves my job search. I will engage in a job search until I find a new job that meets my criteria. This practice involves the following elements:

* Viewing job listings on LinkedIn.com, Indeed.com, Glassdoor.com, and individual companies’ websites
* Applying for one job at a time that interests me. Working on each application in a focused manner through completion and submission
* Accepting offers of assistance from friends and colleagues
* Reflecting upon interviews that did not lead to job offers and trying to learn from the experience
* Asking myself the following three questions when applying for positions, preparing for interviews, and when evaluating job offers
  + Does the opportunity align with my values?
  + Will I have a chance to learn, grow, and stretch professionally?
  + Am I equipped to make a difference in the role at the company or organization?

Those three questions were recommended by Marillyn Hewson, Chairman, President and CEO of Lockheed Martin, in a post she wrote for LinkedIn Pulse (Hewson). They make a lot of sense to me.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Truthfully, I fell out of my practice from time to time during the semester. I expected this to happen. What I really wanted to observe was the methods I used to return to the practice. My key questions were whether I would acknowledge my slip, and whether I had the perseverance to re-enter the practice. The structure of the course provided incentive for me to return to the practice. But, I also found discovered a more significant incentive for the future without the course structure to rely on. I observed that when I am following and engaged in my practice, I am focused, calm, and productive. This leads to a feeling of well-being. When I was engaged in the time management and wellness portion of the practice, I found that I was able to produce very good job applications quickly. This was a profound change. I saw an interesting opportunity at Barnard College one day. I wrote a strong letter and submitted it the next day. And then, the following day, I applied for a Senior Strategist position with SY Partners. I see that creating a schedule a week ahead of time works for me. It helps me to prioritize my "to do" list and to actually complete projects and tasks by tackling one task at a time.

To continue with my practice, I must continue to confront myself. I see that for the primary core practice, I will need to:

* Be truthful with myself.
* Be gentle with myself. I need to recognize that my “best is never going to be the same from one moment to the next.” When I “wake up refreshed and energized in the morning, [my] best will be better than when [I] am tired at night” (Ruiz 75-76).
* Read my former journal entries and reflect on weeks and periods when I was following the practice, and weeks when I fell out of practice. Note what I did or did not do that made the difference in the outcomes.
* Be impeccable with my word. I have told myself that I will follow the practice I created for myself. So, I will do it.

For the job search segment of my practice, I will confront myself by making sure that I am:

* Moving toward a job that will add meaning to my life
* Not making assumptions. Last week I assumed that I had been passed over for a job I applied for at The New School. The hiring manager contacted me on Thursday and apologized for taking so long to contact me. She said that she would like to meet with me. It is not fruitful for me to assume the worst. Rather, it is best to hold up the opportunity in a cloud and try not to make judgments or assumptions about it. While it is difficult, it is best to be patient, and wait to see what the outcome will be.
* Living in the present, and letting go of the past. It is not useful or healthy to hold grudges about difficult things that have happened in the past at The New School. It is much better to let those memories go, and to immerse myself in the present. Perhaps there is another opportunity at the University for me that will meet my criteria. I am currently a candidate for three positions there. I choose to be optimistic and hopeful regarding the positions.

CONCLUSION

As I have been working on this plan for practice paper, an unexpected life event occurred that served as a test for my practice. My husband became gravely ill and had to be hospitalized. I found that my practice helped me to cope with this event, and to remain calm. I focused on the present, and the most important things to do in the present as we went through this health issue. It was clear that my first responsibility was to help my husband receive care, and to listen to his caregivers and make decisions. My second responsibility was to make sure my children were taken care of. My mother-in-law helped to take care of my sons, which was a real gift. And, my third responsibility was to finish my work for the Reflective Practice class in an honorable manner. All other activities and options became unimportant. Even while ill, my husband, who is my chief critical friend and learning partner, encouraged me to leave the hospital to finish my work.

While exercise and journaling have fallen by the wayside for the past few days, I have made conscious choices to live in the present, focus on completing one thing at a time, remain optimistic, and to engage in making verbal gratitude statements. I believe I am fully capable of re-entering my full practice once my husband returns home and life normalizes. I am glad to have created this practice, as the scheduling of my week a week in advance, meditation, journaling, and mindfulness have served me well. I look forward to seeing how the practice evolves further with time. And, I look forward to finding an interesting job opportunity that aligns with my values and provides the opportunity to continue growing and learning while making a significant contribution.

Works Cited

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