

THE EMPTY JAR

NEW WORK
Redirection at Mid-Life

November 18, 2002

Edward S. Gleason

**A woman was carrying a jar full of meal.
While she was walking along a distant road,
the handle of the jar broke
and the meal spilled behind her along the road.
She didn't know it;
she hadn't noticed a problem.
When she reached her house,
she put the jar down
and discovered that it was empty.**

When my father was fifty, he faced a significant vocational crossroad. As a prominent trial and corporate lawyer, his legal expertise, Workmen's Compensation, required almost daily court appearances, frequent arguments before the Massachusetts Supreme Court and untold hours with physicians. This resulted in new, close friends, who were often in our house for meals and conversation. These new friendships produced a fresh, increasingly intense interest in medicine, a fascination that grew so strong that if my father had done what he truly wanted to do, he would have gone to medical school and started his professional life all over again.

Since I applied to Harvard Business School at age fifty-three, I am aware of the dismay that greets a fifty-year-old who takes steps to begin life anew at midlife. It's just not done. At least it was not done in the 1930s when my father considered it, and very, very infrequently even in the 1980s. The point is, however, that that's the way it used to be. It is not the case any longer.

Hindsight, renowned for being 20/20, tells me that if my father, having proved himself in one arena, wanted to redirect his professional life at age fifty, that aim could have been more life-giving than bizarre. As might have been anticipated, however, family, financial and professional considerations intervened. Such a step – completely changing careers at midlife – was clearly impossible, and the response my father received on every side was a resounding, “No!”

At almost the very same time, quite by coincidence and out of the blue, my father also received an offer to join a prominent New York law firm. The new job would have doubled his salary, but we all know, even then, life in New York City is more expensive than in Boston – perhaps twice as expensive. Besides, my mother and father had both spent their entire lives in Boston. The offer was declined.

My father chose a third course. Rather than a new beginning in medicine or a move to New York City, my father chose to become the General Counsel for the Boston-based insurance company he and his law firm had long served. Redirection at mid-life gave way to a safer, more acceptable course: to continue to do essentially the same thing in the same place.

But not indefinitely. My father had a plan, a good plan. The President and General Manager of the insurance company for whom my father worked was his friend of thirty years, Edward Stone. He was such a good friend that I bear his name. My father's plan was simple: he would work closely with Mr. Stone, as he was known in our family, and, at the proper time, Gleason would succeed Stone.

Only that never happened. Those were the days before mandatory retirement. Most men who were Number One in a company, at least in this company, worked as long as they wished, or as long as they were able. Mr. Stone remained President until he was age 77. By that time, my father was 63. He was passed over, put out to pasture. Accompanied by his long-serving secretary, he was given a new, spacious office in a near-by building, each window commanding a magnificent view of Boston Harbor. The only problem was that my father was given nothing to do. He lived for only three more years.

During the last year of their lives, my parents rented a house on Siesta Key, Florida, as they had for each of their three final years, where they spent the winter. The heart disease that had plagued my father so improved in Florida that on a Saturday in mid-March he drove himself to Sarasota to watch the Yankees play the Red Sox. My mother went swimming, alone, as she did three times every day. This time, however, she drowned. The coroner was just leaving the beach when my father arrived back from the ball game.

My father journeyed to Boston, by train, with the body, to live at home, where I returned to be with him for the final months of my senior year at Harvard College. He needed a great deal of care, for he had collapsed almost completely, become virtually helpless, encased by grief. The two of us, therefore, had three months together, days marked by conversations that otherwise would not have occurred.

Those conversations covered many – most – topics, including: death, the future, my mother and my parents' married life, my forthcoming marriage, my father's past and childhood, his career and my career – among others.

On a Sunday in May, after church, where we went regularly, together, and sat in the second pew on the left-hand side of the center aisle, before and during the noon meal that Sunday, my father suggested that we speak of the future and my professional plans. This was not the first or only such conversation, but certainly the most memorable.

“Do you still intend to go to seminary?” he asked.

“Yes. After commissioning, commencement, marriage, two years in the Navy, I hope to attend Virginia Seminary.”

“You know that wouldn’t be my choice,” he interjected. “But since I know it’s yours, and you are very clear about it, I support it. After I die, which no doubt will be soon, you will have some funds to ease the burden.”

“But,” he went on, “For God’s sake, don’t go to that place in Virginia.”

What he meant was that since I was born and brought up in Boston, a graduate of northern schools, I did not belong in Virginia.

“But,” I said, “It’s the best seminary in the church.”

“I don’t care. That’s not important. You don’t belong there. Why, if you go there some day you’ll probably end up living there.”

Again, what he meant was that the connections created by attending Virginia Seminary would undoubtedly mean a job in Virginia. He was quite correct. Seven years later, those connections led to an appointment as rector of a Virginia parish, and years after that a faculty position in the Seminary itself, requiring me to live on the campus. I did, indeed, end up “living there.”

But this was only the beginning of our conversation that particular Sunday, for what my father really wanted to talk about was himself. It was then that he told me about his own vocational decisions, the choices he had made and why. It was then that I learned the pieces of the puzzle that detailed his decision at age fifty.

Beyond everything else, however, I remember his final words. This man, whom I loved and knew to be widely respected as a Boston lawyer, finally said to me: “I really only have one piece of advice. It’s your life. But let me tell you one thing. Never be a lawyer. You spend your entire life fighting other people.

He didn’t mean what he said that day, not really. This was clear then, and it is clearer now. I knew too much. I knew that he had loved working in his library writing those briefs and engaging the court procedures that followed. I’d seen him at work, heard him talk about all of it, read the poems he’d written about those moments and about the rest of his life. His words of caution had been occasioned because something else had intervened, something that changed everything. What he had hoped and dreamed for had not fitted together, not the way he had envisioned, hoped, planned.

When he had come to the crossroads of his midlife, he had **not** taken the road less traveled by.

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More than a decade later, after completing college, two years in the Navy, seminary, two years as a curate and then four years as a rector of a parish, married and with children, I joined the faculty of Exeter, my own boarding school, to serve for several years as the school minister. Half the persons who comprised the faculty at the time had served the Academy for more than thirty years. They had been appointed in the early 1930's after receipt of a gift of six million dollars (a large amount of money in the depths of the Depression) from Edward S. Harkness, a gift that had reinvigorated and revolutionized the Academy. The Harkness gift made possible the Harkness Plan and the Harkness Table. Each classroom was equipped with an oval table around which sat twelve students and an instructor, whose task for each class was to engage a common body of material for which each participant was responsible.

What these faculty members had helped to create was exciting and revolutionary – it still is – but for some, not all, but some, they had stayed in one place doing the same one thing for too long. When I became their colleague, these men, many of whom had been my own teachers, now undertook their professional lives with little vigor or enthusiasm. Close to retirement, they blocked all forms of change, often drank too much, withdrew from most of the daily school life save for what seemed to be their indifferent attention to teaching. The time had come and gone when they might have sought new work. Now it was too late. Would they ever recommend their chosen life's work to a younger person, or would they say, "Never be a teacher. Your life ends in boredom."

After Exeter, I became headmaster of a Boston day and boarding school. The school then comprised some thirty faculty members, who represented the full range of age and tenure. 10% of these persons, a percentage I came to accept as the norm, had ceased to be effective in the classroom, and it was my responsibility to find some way to continue their services, given lengthy and useful tenure, without limiting the educational future of the students whom they were engaged to teach.

Fifteen years later that same faculty body had increased to sixty persons, and throughout those years I had said hello or good-bye to more than two hundred faculty members. I had also learned that a headmaster's most important task, if the job is properly understood, is the hiring, inspiring, shepherding, encouraging and continual renewal of faculty members to make it possible for them to continue, throughout their careers, to achieve their full potential.

That is a large, almost monumental, task. It is difficult enough to motivate a student. How does one motivate a member of the faculty? The most challenging part of

this task is also its most elusive: preventing each of these persons from reaching a “point of no return,” which is the realization that he or she has done the same thing for too long and is no longer effective. Change, new opportunity, new work must be offered before it is too late, and hope is lost.

This realization has increasingly interested me from that day to this. These insights here described are summed up by the words: **NEW WORK – a resource for redirection at mid-life.** This is intended to be an effort to coach, to help, to support persons find a new vocational opportunity at mid-life and beyond. It is rooted in the hope that persons may avoid the experience of coming to the end of the road only to discover that the jar is empty, and they never even knew it.

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We all know that the world has changed since our father and grandfather's days. It is trite even to mention this fact. That was a time when the single profession consumed a lifetime, but that time has passed.

When I became a headmaster, thirty years ago, the world of independent schools through the country was dominated, in large part, by persons who had run one school for their entire professional lives. These persons were the successors – albeit distant successors – of the likes of Horace Taft, Lewis Perry, Samuel Drury, Endicott Peabody, Frank Boyden. Three short years after I had started heading a school, virtually every one of these successors, persons who had spent one career running a school, had completely disappeared. They were just gone. Their names are legion: Matthew Warren, Seymour St. John, Richard Day, John Kemper, William Olsen – and the list goes on and on and on. Every one of them had quit, been fired, or died.

For the most part, save for isolated exceptions, the day of life-long tenure for heads of schools ended right then. Overnight, and for the first time, one had to consider what to do after being a headmaster. At the very same time – the early 1970s – the life of the college president became short-lived. More and more it was clear that no single person could lead any one institution, profit or non-profit, for more than a few years. These are not isolated trends, but patterns for the world in which we now find ourselves. Professional education – all education – serves no longer as a predictor, but a base, a base that becomes wider and wider, broader and broader.

Theologically trained and ordained, I have served as curate and rector of a parish, school chaplain, headmaster, director of development, editor – five distinct and different jobs, each based upon my professional education. How many lawyers work, serially, in private practice, then government, now finance, then politics, even fund-raising and move freely from one to the other? The significant number of practicing physicians presently enrolled in my own seminary is such a significant presence that these persons form a special sub and interest group. Former military officers living in and around greater Washington, D.C. engage in such a wide variety of vocations as to boggle the imagination. Some of the best teachers I once hired came to teaching from totally different professions.

All theology and all fiction are rooted in the autobiography. Autobiography is also the source of the convictions that shape and direct our lives. Convictions are another word for theology.

NEW WORK – a resource for *redirection at mid-life* – is an expression of the theology that emerges from my own life experience. The most important moments of that experience mark career transitions. One story contains a pattern that is normative.

Shortly before graduation from college and commissioning as an officer in the Navy, I received orders to report the following summer to a ship, whose homeport was Norfolk, Virginia. I was shocked. It had literally never occurred to me that I would be assigned to a ship whose homeport was any place other than Boston. Boston was my home. Boston was where I had always lived. Boston was my world. The orders read, “Norfolk.”

My father, standing next to me in the front hall of our house when I opened those orders, offered words of love and support. “You know,” he said, “I could have arranged for you to be assigned to a ship here in Boston. But you never asked, so I figured you wanted to be on your own.”

He was right. Twenty-one year olds want to be independent, but, right then, too late, I realized I’d made a mistake. Or had I?

A year later, my father was dead; I was married, serving at sea on that ship based in Norfolk, and I decided that if two years in the Navy were to be an educational experience, I had already learned everything that this particular ship could teach me. I wanted a new assignment. How could that be achieved?

My father had the right connections, and he could have helped me. But he was dead. My father-in-law, however, was alive and well, and he could help. His former student and good friend, now a senior Navy captain, processed orders in the Bureau of Naval Personnel and could send me wherever he wished. Moreover, my brother-in-law could ask his college roommate, now the Assistant Secretary of the Navy, to intervene on my behalf. So it was that on the same day, I sat down and wrote both my father-in-law and my brother-in-law and asked each of them to help me. All I needed was their

willingness to step forward on my behalf and activate the most reliable historic reality of all professional advancement – the one that has come down to us through the ages: **It's not what you know, but whom you know.**”

They both refused. Neither one of them would help me. Each wrote back and said virtually the same thing, each in his own inimitable style. What they said was: “You’re grown up now, married, independent and too old to ask for help. Do it on your own.” I was crushed, and, as it turned out, completely unprepared for one of the most important discoveries of my life.

On the very next day, on shipboard, again underway and at sea, I returned to my cabin to sleep for a few hours after standing the four to eight early morning watch. The youngest yeoman of my small department, a bright Lithuanian-American draftee from Chicago, knocked on my cabin door, awakening me, and said, excitedly, “Mr. Gleason. Mr. Gleason. You have a message, a message, a dispatch!” Entering the cabin, now he stood right next to my bunk, leaned over and peered in to that small space where I was trying to sleep. He held a clipboard on which I could see the printout, fresh from the shipboard Teletype. “Mr. Gleason. Mr. Gleason. It’s for you! It’s for you. Here. Here. You have orders! You have orders! You’ve been transferred!”

And I had been. If I’d wanted a new and different experience, here it was. Before the month was over, I was to report to be Staff Secretary (chief administrative officer and aide) to COMPLANSHIPFLOT TWO, the Commodore of all LST’s on the East Coast – a new job – far more responsible, interesting and different. It was just what I wanted. It came out of the blue. It was a miracle.

Instantly awake, I jumped out of my bunk, straightened my uniform, combed my hair and rushed down the passageway to see the Executive Officer, Lieutenant Commander Vladimir Fedorowicz, a permanent Chief Boatswain, promoted to commissioned rank for meritorious service while at sea. Our worlds could not have been more different, and while our relationship was completely formal, it was very clear we liked one another and truly enjoyed working together under the very clear guideline that defined our relationship. Right now, I wanted to share the joy of this unbelievable turn of events with my boss, Commander Fedorowicz.

I knocked on his door, heard him say, “Come in.” As I entered his small cabin, I couldn’t restrain myself. “Mr. Fedorowicz, Mr. Fedorowicz. I have orders. I’m leaving RUSHMORE.”

“Yes, Mr. Gleason,” the Executive Officer said. “I know all about it. You’ve done such a good job here on RUSHMORE that I have recommended you for transfer to a better and more interesting job. I shall miss you and your work, but I am more than pleased that my recommendation was followed.”

The moment embodied a life-changing learning of which I have since then been daily aware. It is no longer true that vocational change necessarily happens in

accordance with that old truism of the past **“It’s not what you know, but whom you know.”**

What matters now, I had just learned is this: **who knows you, and who knows what you know.** (repeat).

The old standard has passed. **Who knows you, and who knows what you know** has replaced it.

What excites a person at age twenty or thirty or forty is not necessarily the work of a lifetime. The passion and commitment of youth will only remain alive through re-direction and new opportunity. Edmund Burke’s words have been echoed in many other forms, but Burke stated it well: “The seeds of change are the only possible means of conservation.”

The New Testament is rooted in the reality of the Resurrection, but Christianity is not the only tradition to recognize the fact that new life comes through and results from change and death. The Gospel according to John, however, states this basic reality of human life very well: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain, but if it dies it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

The question is motivation. From where does it come? How does one find it? What makes motivation embrace and direct us to find new life?

During my childhood, my grandfather lived just up the street and over the hill. I was an only and much younger grandson, and since Bapapa lived alone with a housekeeper, (Nana had died when I was very little) I often wandered over, invited or not. Then too, many days, after school, when Dosh drove Babapa’s Lincoln Zepher into the city to pick him up at his office, I went along for the ride. Dosh, whose real name was Frank McGrath, drove a local Newton cab at night. Bapapa no longer drove. He took a cab to the train station each morning. Each afternoon and every weekend, Dosh drove Bapapa.

During those rides in with Dosh and back with Bapapa, afternoons in the office, not to mention occasional Saturday mornings, when the two of us walked around Park Square, ate at his favorite restaurant, located in a building he owned, Bapapa introduced me to his several small pieces of real estate and to his tenants. I learned a great deal, piece by piece, bit by bit. But not until after he died at age 92 was I able to weave it all together.

Born in 1861 on a farm near Monkton, New Brunswick, one of nine children, Bapapa (whose real name was Job) attended a local business college, then moved to Boston, met and married my grandmother, who was from Maine. He was bright and handsome, personable, engaging. He started a small real estate and insurance business and was unusually successful for a young man who began with nothing. He prospered, moved to better and better neighborhoods, sent his daughter to Girls’ Latin, the best girls’

school in the country, they thought, and then to Smith College. When she married, he built her a new house, right near-by, up over the hill. Bapapa knew a thing or two about control.

Then came the Depression. Bapapa was in his late fifties. He lost everything. His business was gone. He was wiped out. Quite understandably, he became deeply depressed, drank more and more heavily, wrecked his car, a Pierce Arrow, no less, and lost his driver's license. But when he hit bottom, he bottomed out. He stopped drinking completely, and thanks to those **who knew him and knew what he knew**, he was able to put his life back together again or even for the first time. He started all over, created a new business, purchased new and different, small, unusual properties, one at a time. Each property was located in or near Park Square, which he maintained was the direction of the future. It was where the new City of Boston finally did move, but not until some forty years after his death, and by then his descendents had sold all the property. When Job Gaskin died, the man I called Bapapa, one would not have called him wealthy, but he did leave a modest estate and a great deal for me to think about when I stop to look at the photographs of him that cover my study walls.

At the time of his death, my grandfather had worked more than thirty-five years after becoming bankrupt and losing everything. He never retired, never wanted to retire. He went to a favorite vacation hotel in Florida in the winter months where, day after day, he played bridge with countless lady friends and to another such hotel in Maine for some weeks each summer. Otherwise, he was in his office at 224 Stuart Street virtually every working day until he died. I never dared ask him if he believed the pattern and outcome of his life had been shaped by his bankruptcy at mid-life and the absolute necessity to start all over again at a time when most persons are getting ready to stop work. Motivation was never an option or a question. Or was it?

NEW WORK – a resource for *redirection at mid-life* helps the individual re-assemble and newly direct his life, bearing in mind that what matters is **who knows you, and who knows what you know.**

- A single career is no longer possible. Five or six different pursuits will be the norm.
- Since we do not live in a perfect world, no employer, no matter who that person, agency, company or entity may be, is invested in an employee's vocational welfare. Employers hire skill sets, and when the need for certain skills changes, so do the employees – at every single level, from the top down. There is no safe job.
- Therefore, an individual is alone responsible for his or her vocational life and future.
- To avoid the inevitable “point of no return,” external motivation is required. It must be sought, created, invited.
- Such motivation is part and parcel of the normal course of events at mid-life. Mid-life carries with it the opportunity for renewal. If one avoids renewal, the point of no return is inevitable.

Gregory Vlastos, Canadian philosopher, said in quite another context some years ago, “There are a thousand ways of saying No and one way of saying Yes.” The one way of saying yes at mid-life is to step forward and find new work, or to position one’s self to be found by the new work that awaits you thanks to **who knows you, and who knows what you know.**

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