

June 2012

Dear Friend of Life/Work Direction:

Over the years—for three decades in my case—past participants come back to tell us stories, eager to let us know the way their life work has come to fruition. They are excited about some recent development that has opened up for them, the culmination of many months of waiting for a dream to unfold. And then we want to hear more because there is always a story, a journey.

One such call came recently from Andrew in California. He had moved into an exciting field of work he had never imagined ten years ago when we first met him. In addition to his hearty thankfulness about being able to settle into a work for which he feels passion—he said thoughtfully, “While I am grateful for the job, I am most thankful for what God has taught me in the wilderness.”

And then he proceeded to describe a remarkable journey—eight years in length—overflowing with the familiar ups and downs, unexpected pauses and dead ends, together with heartening surprises and reassuring synchronicities that always mark one’s passage through life. His insight was keen, showing trenchant understanding of the process of finding one’s true passion. So we asked him to write it to share with all of you as a testament to God’s work to which we have been called in our ministry here.

Andrew’s story reminds us of a truth we know well: that *growth takes time*. This is why we take the long view of our work. Yes, a few months in our vocational process as individuals or in the Threshold group make an impact. But we are fully aware that we only see the first sprouts appearing in the soil of the person’s life. Stories like Andrew’s reassure us that though “we planted, and others water, it is God who gives the increase”—and that takes time.

As you read Andrew’s story in the enclosed folder, let your reflections become a prayer for us, and for the “Andrews” who find their way to Life/Work Direction.

Thank you for caring. We never forget how you help to make the work possible.

In companionship with you and with God,

Life/Work Direction

Andrew's Story



Andrew Larratt-Smith

I enrolled in Threshold in the fall of 2002 mostly because my wife Jen had raved about her experience in the previous year's group. At the time I was involved in campus ministry through Intervarsity. When I had come on staff six years earlier I was filled with passion and enthusiasm and never anticipated that I would want to do anything else. As I entered Threshold I was beginning to feel stirrings that something was wrong and that I was not going to be able to sustain the necessary long-term passion and vision for campus ministry. At the time, I am not sure I could even admit it to myself beyond sensing that my ability to connect with college students was waning as my spiritual life evolved with age.

*I was
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Threshold provided me with an expansive space to explore the question of calling. My previous understanding of calling was constrained, hemmed in by my own narrow conceptions of God, the world, and myself. Calling invoked images of assessments of spiritual gifts where I was pegged and categorized into one of sixteen predefined roles. Callings fell within a hierarchy of faithfulness, with professional ministry topping the list. In Threshold I found the freedom to examine the stirrings rather than bury them in fear, self-imposed constraints, or manufactured spiritual zeal. I found a new language and framework to think about calling. The individual sessions and retreats prompted me to honestly reflect and listen both to myself and to God.

*I found a new
language to think
about calling*

Towards the end of the year I found the courage to admit that campus ministry was not a sustainable fit and to resign my position with Intervarsity. Yet despite my willingness to "step out of the boat", I was terrified of the future and completely paralyzed by fear. I felt pulled towards peacemaking, but had no idea how that could become an actual job. I spent hours in self-reflection, but had great difficulty putting into action the steps I had outlined for my final field project.

The following year I took a sabbatical working with a local carpenter, ostensibly because it gave me some time to reflect before moving on. In retrospect, while the sabbatical year was indeed valuable, I think I chose it mostly because it was the path of least resistance and I was so terrified of the abyss that I had just stepped out into. I did manage to belatedly follow up on some of my field project action steps, and volunteered with a community mediation program. I felt an immediate sense of deep resonance and received encouraging feedback from others. Still, as my sabbatical year came to a close I had no clear sense of what I would be doing for work.

*I was terrified
of the abyss*

Then I partnered with a friend from church to start a non-profit devoted to bringing about racial reconciliation among local congregations in the Boston area. It was a bold step of faith... and a huge dead end. We had no idea what we were doing, no funding model, and no real plan. Just as I was awakening to the reality of how impractical we were, Jen was accepted into graduate school in Los Angeles. I was confronted with moving across the country to a new city without any clear direction.

My mentor from the community mediation program directed me to Pepperdine law school In Los Angeles, and its highly ranked Masters in Dispute Resolution (MDR) degree. However, the one year degree cost over \$30,000 and we were not in a position to make that financial sacrifice. But at a wedding the following day we bumped into a church friend who had recently moved to LA and who had applied to law schools and had received the offer of a full scholarship from Pepperdine on the strength of her LSAT score. I had taken the LSAT years earlier, and had achieved a similar score.

*I felt that God
was speaking
to me*

I felt that God was speaking to me. I did not believe he was making any specific promises. Rather I felt he was saying that he knows me, that he was going before me, and that if I were to move to LA for Jen's sake he would honor that decision. On the strength of this word, we made the move to LA.

Nonetheless, I still remained paralyzed and afraid. unable even to look for a job, convinced I had nothing to offer. In the end I found a wonderful administrative temp position in an incredibly supportive environment that helped me regain my sense of value.

In the fall of 2007, I enrolled in a regular three year law degree (JD) at UCLA as well as the Masters in Dispute Resolution degree at Pepperdine, stretching the MDR coursework out over the three years. While my passion was for the dispute resolution material, the law degree is more widely recognized as a serious credential. And amazingly I was able to do it all without going into debt.

As I concurrently pursued both degrees, a number of things came into focus. My passion for dispute resolution was reaffirmed, while it was clear I had no such passion for the law.

*Things came
into focus* Additionally, I recognized that it was very difficult to break into mediation because the field is dominated by retired judges, even though good retired judges often make mediocre mediators.

So I began to explore areas of the law where mediation is practiced more widely and narrowed in on employment law. By the end of my second summer I had secured a job offer to work in a large corporate firm known for their employment law after I graduated and passed the bar. I thought I was making progress.

One of my mediation professors expressed concerns about my plan. He was worried that I would end up sucked into the legal profession and never make it to practicing dispute resolution and challenged me to get serious about mediation. I knew he was right.

However, my professor's alternative was if anything worse. He suggested that I turn down the offer from the law firm and hang my shingle as a mediator straight out of law school. If I was willing to market myself aggressively, and starve for a decade or so I might eventually build a sustainable practice. This was impractical. Jen had just given birth to our first child. She was not willing to starve for a decade. Furthermore we both knew that entrepreneurship is not my strength. I have never been good at self-promotion, and had hated fund-raising in my years in campus ministry.

I was tempted to despair once again. I had stepped out of campus ministry and had spent years in the wilderness, made significant investments of time and money to return to school in my mid-thirties to pursue peacemaking, and my choices were to work in a high-burnout profession devoted to profiting from an adversarial process or foolishly risk my family's future on my ability to surmount enormous personal and financial hurdles.

*I was tempted to
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in the wilderness.*

But instead of despairing, I re-evaluated and considered: was there some role that was similar to that of a mediator to which I might be better suited? I had previously explored the role of Ombudsman, and decided to research it more seriously, and came to see that it was actually a much better fit for me than a mediator. An Ombuds is an in-house neutral, employed by a large organization, who assists employees and/or other constituents to informally navigate conflict or problems within the organization. Occasionally this involves mediating between parties. More often it involves one-sided mediation, or coaching.

Nonetheless, it makes use of a very similar skill set to mediation, and addresses workplace conflict. It is generally an earlier intervention in the conflict even than mediation, and requires the ability to think about institutional systems. Furthermore, it provides a steady paycheck, without the continuous need for self-promotion.

I still faced the enormous hurdle of actually landing an Ombuds position. There are not many positions available and they tend to go to candidates who are either already internal to the organization or have prior experience. So my revised plan was to spend my final year of school building my Ombuds credentials, by writing a research paper on the Ombuds, getting an internship in an Ombuds office and developing ties to that community.

*Everything seemed
to be falling
into place*

I picked a topic that seemed relevant to the field, and started researching in earnest. Then I came across a notice about a writing contest sponsored by the Ombuds professional association. The topic was the exact one I was researching!

I entered and won the contest. The prize included a cash prize but more importantly an all-expense paid trip to the annual conference where I presented my paper, which was published in the professional association's journal.

I had briefly considered attending the Ombuds professional association's annual conference being held later that year in New Orleans. But it had seemed like a long, expensive trip, all to wander around among strangers trying to explain what I was doing there. Now, instead of wandering around feeling forlorn, I spent the conference being introduced as a minor celebrity!

I graduated from law school that spring, and took the California bar in July. My job at the law firm was set to start in January of the next year. So I arranged to intern that fall in UCLA's Ombuds office. Everything seemed to be falling into place until I learned in late November I had not passed the bar.

Four days later I received an unexpected phone call from the Ombudsman at University of California, Riverside (UCR) whom I had met at the conference. She was leaving for a different position at the end of the year. UCR needed someone to fill in as the interim Ombuds while they conducted a search for a permanent replacement. Was I available in January?

Gratefully, I took the interim position and applied for the permanent position, commuting three hours a day to and from UCR. In my spare time I studied for the bar being administered in February (about the same time our son was due to arrive). In February, I took the bar, feeling woefully under-prepared. Our son William was born four days later.

In April I landed the permanent Ombuds position at UCR and actually received a competing offer for an ombuds position at another university that same week. I accepted the UCR position and politely declined the law firm's standing offer. In May I found out I had passed the bar, but I now expect I will not spend a single day of my life practicing law.

*God provided a
sustainable career*

It has been over a year since I started at UCR, and I love my work. Almost eight years after Threshold inspired me to quit my job, God provided a sustainable career in conflict resolution.

Afterword. . .from Andrew

But while I am grateful for the job, I am most thankful for what God has taught me in the wilderness. Here are the lessons he has shown along the way:

Do not idolize the job. Jobs are like the Promised Land. And we all know that once the Israelites entered the Promised Land they lived happily ever after. No. The story continues. Even though I love my job, it has its challenges. Aspects of it are boring, or annoying. I struggle to achieve appropriate work-life balance. Who knows how I will feel about it in 5 years? Perhaps my passion for it will wane, as did my passion for campus ministry. Who knows where God will lead me next? The temptation is to grasp and seize. But I could lose it tomorrow. I am not static. I need to remain open to God and walk faithfully with him through every season of life. Work is important but loving God, family, friends, and others are far more important. Yes, I should continue to press on and pursue His calling, but I also must seek to be satisfied in every circumstance.

Allow the dream to be refined. Dreams, even God-given dreams are often intermingled with our own sin, arrogance, pride, selfishness. They need to be tested and refined. The challenge is not to give up on them, or to compromise their integrity, but be willing to see them changed and refined, rather than clinging stubbornly to some utopian ideal. It is tough to navigate between idealism and pragmatism. I found myself bouncing back and forth between fixating on a fantasy and wanting just to get paid. The challenge is to make the right compromises. This can be a very painful process.

Be realistic about who you are. Yes, we need to be open to change and inner transformation, but God has shaped each of us in a particular way. As we grow more comfortable, and honest with the way we are wired, we are better able to find appropriate fits. It took me a while to realize that I do not do well in radically entrepreneurial ventures. I still hope to engage in some entrepreneurial activities, but I know I will need the right partners and support structures in place.

Move forward prayerfully. There were times I sat passively paralyzed by fear and called it waiting on God. At other moments, I attempted to seize control of destiny and called it stepping out in faith. I feel that I am learning that faith involves both listening and action. It involves moments of reflection, coupled with a willingness to exercise that reflection into some action, followed by a willingness to stop, listen again and possibly be redirected into a new action.

False starts and dead ends are okay. They are a natural part of the learning and growing process. Do not be afraid or ashamed of them. They will be redeemed.

Passage through the wilderness is not linear. Eight years is not forty but it felt like it at times. For the longest time I felt like I was getting nowhere. Then, once I had finally a plan in place that seemed somewhat realistic, suddenly God opened doors faster than I dreamed possible.

Fear not. I wish I had not been so afraid and anxious. But I was and God was willing to meet me in my fear. He is teaching me courage. It is easy to be self-critical, but God is gracious. He is able to work with even small acts of courage. Threshold and quitting my job was getting out of the boat. There were many times I felt I was drowning and that I would be overwhelmed. Yes, Jesus has power over the storm, but even more importantly he is with us in the storm, and is coaxing us not to be afraid.