



Life/Work Direction

32 Halifax Street

Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

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Dear fellow pilgrims,

We write in hopes of keeping a conversation going with you. You may have explored the direction of your life and potential with us, or simply be a friend who supports our mission. In either case, to us you are fellow pilgrims with whom we want to keep learning.

No one ever “graduates” from discerning vocation.

Whether we be twenty-three or seventy-three, it is God’s relational way with us, an unfolding of call and response, call and response.

We create spaces for people to listen for this calling not just once, but over the course of their entire lives.

One way we do this is by paying attention to your unfolding stories with an ear for valuable lessons worth sharing. In this letter we explore a challenge often encountered when you come here: the risk of contemplating mid-career change. This is especially hard when you come from a place of established skill, accomplishment and security, and consider a change in direction. Yet your growth over the years has often awakened you to a new sense of yourself and your place in God’s world, stirring you to risk change.

We are grateful to Jim Harper, Andrew Tsou and Jonathan Parker for sharing experiences that highlight a way of approaching change—one that strikes us as especially valuable when change feels risky— through a preliminary step of experimentation. All of them leveraged their professional capital to shift to four-day weeks at their existing job to win for themselves one day a week to explore and gain perspective. They did so for different purposes and with different results, but each found the experiment a valuable way to listen and respond.

May their steps of faithful exploration promote your own and perhaps prompt you to share your own travel lessons with us too.

With our prayers for your encouragement,

Scott, Louise & Eunice



Jim Harper

a midlife transition and leap of faith

I was almost 40 and knew in my heart that God had blessed me incredibly and I had all the reasons in the world to be happy: 20 years and counting of marriage to my wonderful wife Michelle; three healthy daughters; and a job that provided well and could easily be stable for life; and the respect and trust of friends and colleagues.

So why did I feel so unsatisfied in my heart as I considered the future? The answer came unexpectedly during a conversation with my wife as we walked in our neighborhood on a sunny day with our dog. "I feel sad when I consider people I know who gradually slip into a pattern of *going through the motions* in their life and work and who have stopped growing and living life to the full." As soon as I began describing that feeling, a realization hit me—I was becoming one of those people myself!

*Had I stopped
growing and
living to the
fullest?*

That conversation was the beginning of a three-year process of finding my current direction in life. I started with a season of seeking prayer and counsel from trusted friends, and enrolled in Life/Work Direction's vocational process. Toward the end of that season, it became clear that I needed to leave my current job in order to recapture the vitality and vision I longed for.

While I was very tempted to leave my job without knowing my next step, I couldn't find peace with that choice. That kind of "leap of faith" was not faithful to the needs of my family.

—My core profession proved valuable when EGC needed help with the layout and use of their building. I saw God could use the profession in which I was already skilled in new ways: churches, Christian camps, and non-profits need architects.

There were personal learnings too:

—I had the freedom and control to set my own terms of engagement with my job or career rather than accepting the status quo or what was traditionally expected.

—I saw I had the power to make changes, what change felt like, and I didn't always have to wait around for serendipity to change things for me.

—I applied my experimenting with change in practical areas. I was not as successful in matters of diet to treat a physical condition, but the decision of my family to move away from Boston to Connecticut after 13 years worked out well. I switched offices and bosses, but not company or career.

I changed my perspective

Sometimes change is not big. Sometimes change is temporary. Sometimes a change in schedule or setting doesn't lead to a whole new vocation but to a change in perspective. God did not make a mistake in making me an architect, and scaling back at work and volunteering gave me the space to see that how I am made has Kingdom value. And that first risk-taking step got me unstuck.



Jonathan Parker

*taking the risk
to experiment*

In 2013, I was married with four kids, involved in my church, and worked 40 hours a week as an architect. All of these things are still true. I was also unhappy in my job, not content as an architect, and felt I needed a vocational change, but I was risk averse and felt stuck. Those things are no longer true. Emboldened by my year with Threshold at Life/Work Direction, I followed the example set by another former participant and decided to take a small step, a mini-risk, and to experiment.

There are different ways to leverage “professional capital” other than climbing the corporate ladder or increasing your pay. I needed space to investigate vocational change, so I decided—mid-career—to cut back my job and pay to four days a week. Every Wednesday. I volunteered for the Emanuel Gospel Center, a faith-based non-profit that strengthens leaders to serve the diverse urban community in Boston.

*I cut back my
job and pay*

I loved my time there, although the experience did not lead to a new career connection like I initially expected. Rather it started a season of making many small changes:

- My skills as architect and planner could translate into the organization’s project of mapping a Boston Church Directory listing every church in the area.
- My variety in my work pattern—2 days on, 1 volunteering, 2 days back at work—gave me more staying power. And I could accomplish in 32 hours what I used to drag over 40.

I saw that staying where I was and trusting God to help me recognize the right time and opportunity to leave was also a significant leap of faith. My wife and I decided together to take a different first step: to scale back my work week to a 32-hour, four-day schedule. I learned:

- Letting go of 20% of our income showed me that I had placed too much emphasis on a particular level of income as a primary source of **security**.
- Restructuring my hours also created **space** for me to commit significant blocks of time to meaningful exploration of other career paths.
- I gradually restructured my responsibilities so that transitioning out of my job two years later was possible on relatively short notice with **minimal disruption** to my colleagues and their work.

Thus the shorter schedule and change in income helped loosen the complex knot of interrelated barriers to mid-career change and helped me broaden my outlook for possibilities. When the right opportunity for my next job came last fall, I was ready to move quickly and with confidence.

Today I am a year and a half past my leap out of the stability of institutional biotechnology research and development and into the incredibly dynamic world of entrepreneurship and medical technology and product development. I am enjoying the fruits of the investment made at Life/Work Direction and my family.

I learned that change and uncertainty can produce growth and enjoyment, rather than fear and stress. I am at peace with *who I am* independent from *what I do*. When challenges arise, my renewed sense of purpose make me stronger and more resilient, rather than weakened and discouraged.



Andrew Tsou

*making space and time
for fullness*

My experience as part of my Threshold group two years ago prompted major changes in my life. Sharing “stories of fulfilling experiences” in the safe environment Life/Work Direction provides focused me on the sources of “deep gladness” I needed to attend to in my own life.

**I discovered
deep gladness
again!**

I began writing creatively again. I went camping in the White Mountains of New Hampshire five times, and climbed Mt. Katahdin in Maine via the icy Knife’s Edge. I traveled to India, speaking with a wide spectrum of Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists, before attending a Christian pastors’ conference in Hyderabad. Coming back to Boston, I began volunteering at a faith-based community development organization, where I am now part of paid part-time staff.

In order to make time for all this, I spoke with my task leads and line managers at my tech job and reduced my hours as a full-time Systems Engineer from 40 hours to 30. I am not going to lie. It was unsettling. My energy and passion for learning new things has been spread thin, and I am not able to achieve the same level of excellence in activities that used to define me in my tech job, and this has been a significant death of sorts.

**It was unsettling
—a death of sorts**

To use an engineering analogy, I feel like an isotropic source radiating out in all directions into the vastness of space, without the focusing lens I once had.

The word “coasting” came up in my mid-year review, and for a moment, it was terrifying. The feedback was friendly and honest, and completely accurate (albeit from a relative perspective, I was still “meeting requirements”). I am grateful for it and have been reexamining my attitude and aspirations at work and rethinking my career path.

My view of God is transforming—my understanding of what Jesus meant when he promised us “life to the full.” At times, I feel as if I’ve been extremely selfish. Self-indulgent. Wasteful. “*With the \$3,000 you spent traveling around India, you could have (a) supported a charity, (b) given more to missionaries, (c) adopted a child, and (d)—fill in the blanks with another sacrificial item.*”

But then I pause and am reminded that “the glory of God is a human being fully alive,” and that self-care is not the same as selfishness. I am bewildered and blessed.

**I am
bewildered
and blessed**

This is the hand I have been dealt: —growing up in a western world of plenty, the son of immigrant parents. Perhaps it is my mission, in part, to demonstrate to the world just how generous and gracious God really is, a God of extravagant resources. There is life here, if only I’d ask, receive, and say thank you more often.

As I have pursued things that have made me feel “strangely alive”, inexplicably there has been peace. I have no regrets. With the encouragement and insights received at Life/Work Direction, I have listened to the deeper desires of my heart with like-minded traveling companions. Despite the added stress of a bi-vocational non-traditional work week, I am continuing my 30-hour engineering schedule and pursuing the non-profit ministry path, looking forward to what God has in store for me next.