

## Reflections of Giving Up Well Paying Jobs

The old man kept talking 'bout his life and his times  
He fell asleep with his head against the window  
He said an honest man's pillow is his peace of mind  
This world offers riches and riches will grow wings  
I don't take stock in those uncertain things

The old man had a vision but it was hard for me to follow  
I do things my way and I pay a high price  
When I think back on the old man and the bus ride  
Now that I'm older I can see he was right  
--"Minutes to Memories" by George Green, George Michael Green, John  
Mellencamp

Some who read this may think that I am an ungrateful fool for the opportunities I walked away from. Others may admire what they see as courage. Still more may decide that I am a victim of my own selfish pride and deserve what I got. In any case, for the few times I've shared this following story orally, I've had all three responses. Personally, I think all three responses are accurate. We were made for perfection, we choose destruction and we live somewhere in between.

Seven years before I wrote the first draft of this document, I lived in a 5 bedroom, 3600 square foot house with over an acre and a half of land exactly one block from the historic district of our small city. Most of the land was in a huge back yard that had a privacy fence on three sides and a thick wooded area protecting the back side. There was a 27,000 gallon swimming pool with diving board in the backyard. My wife (at the time) and I each had one additional house that we had lived in before our marriage, and they were both being rented. We both had comfortable office jobs and we each earned over \$75,000 a year with no overtime expected and liberal vacation times. On top of that, I made decent amounts of money from the Army Reserves. Now, I am divorced, living in a 35 foot camper trailer, typically working 46 hours or more a week on my feet on hard, concrete floors.

**A) Losing the Jobs:** I worked what was once a great government job as an Environmental Engineer and was also an officer in the Army Reserves. The first job I gave up was the Army Reserves. I don't see the point in going into all the details, but I will speak briefly on it. When all is said and done, the service that I once loved became too political for me. I didn't mind others taking credit for work that was largely done by me, as I felt we were all on the same team. But at some point it seemed to me that, not only was I helping advance the careers of others, but that I was also being actively held back. Perhaps it was my pride taking offense to being slighted in such a way, but it was clear that I was suffering an injustice. I could have fought the injustice and most likely won, but I was looking into the future and realized that things would only get worse instead of better. Should I stay and suffer so I could be in a position to make changes someday, or should I leave the military while I still was proud to be a member? Ultimately, I left. Despite the loss of income, this was not a financial problem for me. I was not in the military for the extra money to begin with; I did it for my country. Besides, I had just started selling things on EBay and I quickly was earning more money there for my time spent than in the reserves. But this set the stage for later events.

For many years, I loved my environmental job and was proud to work there. When I joined,

85% of the workforce was within 5 years of retirement age, so promotion opportunities were ripe. But, as with the reserves, there were leadership changes. Unlike the reserves, this job was too important for me to give it up so easily. For my last two years there, I tried to make things work. In fairness to my supervisors, I tried to change their minds as opposed to me adapting to what they wanted. I was a recognized expert on environmental laws for fuel storage tanks in the U. S. Air Force. I had won an award for having the top environmental program in the Air Force. My counterpart at higher headquarters often directed other environmental personnel to me to answer questions, and I was an instructor at Environmental Symposiums for my specialty. My emergency response plan was unofficially recognized as the standard in Air Combat Command (copies were provided to other bases as an example, although no official memo required following it), and parts of it were incorporated into training sessions for Air Force inspection teams. I had a lot of pride in my work, and didn't take well to those who, despite having no experience and being very ignorant of the details, felt they needed to scrutinize everything I did or why I was doing it.

In response to my resistance, I gradually lost more and more of my previous responsibilities and was given new duties instead. Many of the duties I lost were required by law to be done. Some were given to contractors to do at exuberant prices, and others were tasked to personnel outside my office (which meant they were often being done incorrectly if they were being done at all). This drama caused anger problems for me at work and stress at home (although I never got violent). But I knew that enough was enough when I was asked to falsify some statements. These were unimportant documents and it would have been unlikely I would have ever been found out. But this was a line I knew I could not cross, and I refused. There was no retribution for my refusal (other than to have that duty taken away from me), but any doubts about my own culpability in the friction at work was now gone. Whatever my own faults, I would not be part of a group that cared so little for the very laws they swore to uphold.

Fortunately, my online business had grown very fast. One month I even netted more with it than with my full time job, so I made arrangements to quit. I paid off all debts except the mortgages on the houses, but refinanced them for lower monthly payments. I built a small savings and planned out a strategy for business growth. I used this to predict the earliest time I could leave the job and still be able to build the business to where I could live off its profits.

This is when I really took a fall financially. The very first month after I left the job, my online income was much lower than expected. This didn't bother me at first as things like that happen in sales. But it never recovered. Rather than slowly grow, my business slowly declined no matter how much effort I put into it. Speaking to other people I knew who also sold on Ebay, they all had similar experiences with unexplained dropping of sales during that time (although I was the only one who actually quit a job). I started looking for other jobs, and took a few part-time to supplement my income. Then I suddenly had an opportunity I thought might salvage things.

A friend was selling a brick-and-mortar store whose merchandise was compatible with what I was selling online. With financial help from my parents, I purchased it. Although his store was faltering, he did have a faithful core of clientele and I thought that, with my inventory added to his, the store could grow to bring in a bigger customer base. Income from the store rose rapidly, and within two months I was making more than he had been. The idea was working, but not well enough. Despite the successful growth in customers, I could only make sufficient income three months a year to cover my living expenses, while the other nine months dragged me down. I slowly burned up my last reserves. I

quickly built back up all the debt I had paid off not all that long ago. I was close to succeeding, but couldn't find the way to take that final step. To make matters worse, I had to replace the AC unit in my rental property and soon after that the renters became lax on payments. I was not surprised when my agent finally told me that the renters abandoned the property. Fortunately, it was not "trashed" as often happens in such cases.

Two years after leaving my government job, my wife and I made a painful decision to leave the house we lived in and move into my newly abandoned property. I also stopped making payments on all but one credit card and one loaning agency. Ultimately, the big house was claimed by the bank, and three of the four credit card companies I stopped paying took me to small claims court for default of payment.

Moving to the smaller house basically meant giving up about 50% of everything the family owned. I've heard some claim that they don't fear death, they fear dying. My experience with downsizing could be described in a similar manner. After all the painful experiences leading up to this point, it was actually cathartic going through it. As I dug through every nook and cranny of the house pulling out stuff to put on the lawn for a massive sale, I was shocked by how easy it was to give things up. As I was putting things on tables, I was amazed to see how little I cared for them. Things that I hadn't seen or touched in years. Things that may have been useful once but were no longer needed. Things I forgot I even had. Things I couldn't even remember the reason for getting in the first place. Then I thought about how I worked and worried to keep a big house so I could hold on to them, even though they brought neither happiness nor assistance. The only negative feeling I had left was the frustration in knowing that, for one last time, I was still having to labor for them in order to get them where they could be sold.

Within a year of moving to the smaller house, my wife and I separated and ultimately divorced. I don't blame her for having a hard time with all the sudden changes that had happened recently, especially since they were the direct results of me leaving my job. But as I reflect over our 13-year marriage, I could see cracks forming early in the marriage. "We" were never the center of the marriage -- other things were: careers, children and lifestyles. "We" ranked very low in our list of priorities. As a quick aside, there may be those who question why I mentioned children here. To be clear, I certainly don't blame my children, nor do I think it was a mistake in making them a priority. But I do believe that children are best cared for in a healthy family, and I don't think a healthy family can exist if the parents don't ensure the "we" is strong.

Almost exactly five years after I left my job as an Environmental Engineer, I finally found a job with the Post Office. Part of the beauty of this job is that it uses the same retirement program as the Air Force job, so my retirement benefits are improving with each year I put in. The new job forced me to move again, this time to a whole new city. I lived in an inexpensive apartment for a year and then moved into the camper trailer I am in now. This required me to downsize again. As before, just about 50% of all I still owned had to go away quickly. As I had purchased little during this time by myself, I effectively was at about 25% of what I had owned just a few years before. Knowing what to expect meant I put no more thought into the purging than one would spend on tying shoes: I did what needed to be done and didn't think about it afterwards. Actually, much of what I kept after this purge were records of dubious value. Rather than risk "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," I held on to them until I could go through them in detail. Now that I have gone through those papers, I would say that what I have now is probably less than 15% of what I owned just 4 years ago. Should a third

downsizing be necessary, I already know where much of it will come from.

**B) History of My Faith:** The experiences shared here represent the second big epiphany I've had in my faith as a Christian in general and a Catholic in particular. The first came when divorcing my first wife.

Prior to that, I was raised Catholic, went to Catholic school for 12 years and thought I was a good person. I took some of the petty politics I saw in the Church to heart, and when I went to college I fell into the trap of Gnosticism, which holds knowledge as all-important. Rituals, including mass, were archaic and unnecessary. Gnosticism led to spirituality, which holds the supernatural as an idea independent of anything else and unique to each individual. All institutions, including the Church, were run by people and therefore corruptible and fallible. So I stopped going to church as soon as I left my parent's home.

But God is spiritual and we live in a physical world. Religion, and therefore churches, are an essential tie between the spiritual and the physical. While not going to church seemed to be liberating at the time, the fact is that what I had really done was remove any spiritual grounding in my life. By losing this grounding, I no longer had any spiritual perspective. The real God no longer had a place in my reality, and my reality no longer had a place for the real God. I didn't see it this way back then, but now it's clear how delusional I was. Then my first marriage failed, and I was in pain I had never felt before or since.

The pain finally drove me back to the Church. There, during the Lord's Prayer, a woman in my pew reached out her hand so we could all be united in the prayer. It was a relatively new custom introduced when I was younger and against which I originally rebelled. In no small part, my prideful scorn of it helped direct me to leaving the Church. Now there was a total stranger (whom I never saw again) offering me more comfort than my own estranged wife! And only because of a ritual I had once mocked. In an instant, I realized how foolish I had been all those years. I learned not to be so judgmental about Church rituals, and I started attending some type of Church service, preferably Catholic, every week. While this was a big step for me, I failed to make any more progress after that until my business dreams described here began to crumble.

I always enjoyed hearing about theology, but was very lazy about it. I never went out of my way to learn anything, content to let the weekly homily provide my education on this matter. There would be several times I would hear something at church that really touched me, but it never inspired me to search for more. This brings us back to the main story.

Some time before we moved out of the big house, my wife, who was Baptist, convinced me to go to a non-denominational church that had Baptist ties. We originally planned to alternate between that one and my Catholic church. The preacher there was very adamant about being as true to the faith as the early Christians practiced it. As a result, his preaching and insights were not significantly different than what the Catholic Church would have taught on those same passages. In my current methodical study of the Catholic Catechism since that time, I've yet to find anything that was in conflict with what he preached. In contrast, my church had some foreign priests come in which were difficult to understand. I remembered the lesson of holding hands from before, so it was a tough decision, but being as honest as I could with myself, I recognized that I was learning more about my faith in my wife's church than in my own. We soon were going to her church exclusively. I refused to join her

church, however. While the preaching may have been in line with Catholic teaching, their rituals were another matter (and need not be discussed here).

**C) My Faith During the Economic Crisis:** The failures of my online and brick-and-mortar businesses were quite painful. I'd spend nights awake, stressed because I could see what was happening but was helpless to prevent it. I'd sit on the sofa and stare out the window at nothing particular and pray to God. I'd think of things like Gethsemane, Job's afflictions, the Jewish Holocaust in World War II, and other things to try to find perspective in what was going on. It's one thing to sympathize with others' misery; it's another to go through your own trials, even if they pale in comparison.

I knew the risks I was taking even before I quit my job, asking God in prayer if my decision to quit was the right one every night for months. Up to the night before I turned in my resignation, I prayed for God to somehow stop me if this was the wrong thing to do. But everything seemed to point me in this direction. My sales met or exceeded my projections ten of the twelve months prior to leaving, leaving me ahead of where I hoped to be when that day came. Quitting my job may have indeed been partially a result of my pride, but nonetheless it was also a huge act of faith for me to trust God to see me through whatever happened. As my online business failed to perform satisfactorily, I asked God if it was my pride that brought me there, or if it was part of His plan. When the store opportunity came up, the cycle repeated, with me asking if this was the right thing to do before and then wondering why I was suffering afterwards. I sympathized particularly with Jeremiah, who suffered for doing what God wanted. Then, one night, I suddenly felt a certain calm. I still didn't know what would happen, but I finally learned to give up my anxiety and trust God for the outcome. I was finally able to experience what I had known to be right.

Shortly after this revelation, the preacher at my wife's church that I liked so much came over to my store to start a book study of C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity*. While this study with him didn't last very long, I was captivated by the arguments Lewis made and a fire started in my soul to preach the logic of my faith. I bought more books by Lewis and started reading them. I started joining Christian chat rooms, and I am currently a moderator in a Catholic one. I try to help explain the faith to believers, try to persuade non-believers that Christianity is a logical belief, and to stand up to those who spread lies and attempt to discredit Christianity in general and Catholicism in particular. Such work in the chat rooms showed me how little I really knew about my faith, and I have since expanded my readings in many directions. My library of religious studies is steadily growing, as is my understanding of the faith. From my readings, I have written many essays, such as this one, to explain Christian faith to any who are interested in my thoughts.

**D) The Consequences:** I can honestly say I am living comfortably. I spend little time having to maintain this small abode. I can do a full "spring cleaning" of it in about the same time it used to take me to do a weekly pool cleaning. My basic needs are met and I have the space needed to perform my hobbies. The only thing I do miss is wall space for a bookshelf, as I like to read. But with the low rent costs, I can afford a storage facility to keep them and still have money left over.

I find the mentality of my new supervisors are similar to the ones I left as an engineer. While my supervision may have not changed, I have. As a blue collar worker, I am not challenged with the ethical dilemmas that my former white collar position presented me. The outcome of my work, as long as I do it properly, is no longer my concern: I do what supervisors tell me to do and they are responsible for what happens because of it. My career path is narrow and limited, but it cannot be sabotaged by

petty politics. Other than supervisors issuing routine directives, no one there has any power over me that I don't freely give.

But perhaps the most pressing question, considering the nature of this document, is did I do the right thing in quitting those jobs? After all, if I had been less prideful, I could still be living the life that bordered on the upper class. If I had taken advantage of certain opportunities, I may very well have *been* upper class. I might never have divorced my wife of 13 years. I don't know how to answer this question. But as C.S. Lewis shows so graphically and tenderly in *A Grief Observed*, if we ask God a question and don't get an answer, perhaps it is not that God didn't answer it so much as that our question was nonsense to begin with.

All I know for certain is that God was with me through it all and that my current peace of mind is from Him. I have never *doubted* God's presence since that fateful day I returned to Church, but I never *felt* His presence until my businesses failed. I felt Him like one feels someone standing behind them but out of sight. No matter how painful or hopeless things looked, I could not deny He was there. I didn't beseech a God hidden in the stars those painful nights; I was talking to someone standing behind me. I don't know if I would have felt His presence if I had chosen differently or suffered less. But since I *did* feel Him as things unfolded, those "might-have-beens" are meaningless to me. I have no desire to change the past, nor can I think of anything lost that I wish I kept.

Another hot one on Highway 11  
This is my life, it's what I've chosen to do  
There are no free rides, no one said it'd be easy  
The old man told me this my son, I'm telling it to you

Days turn to minutes  
and minutes to memories  
Life sweeps away the dreams  
that we had planned  
You are the young and you are the future  
So suck it up and tough it out  
And be the best you can  
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