

Wellness and Renewal

Tom David

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I'll never forget when I was first introduced to Howard Kahn, and was told that he would be heading a big new foundation devoted to grantmaking in health. When I asked him what it would be called, he replied "The California Wellness Foundation." Well, this is not very flattering to admit, but my first (private) reaction was "how precious." To me, the word "wellness" conjured up images like a group of people doing tai chi at sunrise in loose purple cotton outfits ... or a pair of slender blonde sunbronzed people in designer workout clothes and expensive shoes running down the beach while flashing dazzling smiles ... in other words a Madison Avenue "take" on wellness with a strong "new age" twist. Of course, in those days I was an unrepentant carnivore who didn't even have a regular program of exercise, let alone meditation or massage. I've come a long way since then.

My journey over the past seven years has brought me to a whole new appreciation for the concept of wellness, beginning with the work that this foundation has done. I've sat in on countless conversations with people from underserved communities throughout this state and have found that they enthusiastically embrace the concept of wellness. For them, it provides an image of healing and of hope ... a really powerful metaphor for personal and community transformation ... in a way that "health" does not. For too many of them, health and health care have negative connotations, bound up in institutions that have long been insensitive to their needs.

So, it turns out that "wellness" was the perfect name for this foundation after all... even though it still draws some snickers from folks in other less enlightened parts of the country. I'm very proud to have been part of an institution that has tried to spread that message throughout California. In that process, it's taken me a lot longer to come to the realization that message applies to me as well. As my doctor has said to me repeatedly "you can't really be good at taking care of others unless you take care of yourself first."

That was a hard message for me to hear, as I think it would be for most of the people in this room. After all, we've consciously devoted our lives to issues and causes greater than ourselves. On another level, it also flies in the face of some profound societal ambivalence we seem to have about making personal health and well being a real priority.

We've seen some high profile examples of that in the not too distant past when the Vice President of the U.S. had cardiac catheterization but was back at his desk the very next day. Or the quarterback of a pro football team who had experienced repeat concussions and his decision to stop playing to protect his health (after much agonizing) was greeted with groans of dismay by fans and in the media.

Of course, it's also tangled up with our values about work, positional authority and power as well. Clearly, those are the things that matter most in America today. We're a culture that values urgency over deliberateness and action over reflection. Some of the most blatant evidence of that is our obsession with a stock market that rises and falls on quarterly financial indicators rather than the long view. One of the ugly sides of globalization is that we're now doing our best to impose those values on the rest of the world. In my case, I've been trying to do too many things, too fast, all the time. And, after years of maintaining that pace, there's been a cost.

When my first e-mail went out announcing my resignation from the foundation, a number of you let me know that you were "shocked" and "dismayed" to learn of my decision. In our culture, it's hard to believe that someone could walk away from a great job that's very well compensated, highly visible and with lots of perceived power ... with nothing lined up, let alone the likelihood of voluntarily seeking a less prestigious position. The conclusion that many people jumped to was that I must be seriously ill ... why else would I be doing this?

And let me tell you, I'm not immune to those pervasive cultural norms. This has not been an easy process, by any means. Those things run deep and have caused me to do a lot of second guessing. But what does that tell us about what a long way we have to go in this culture to really embrace wellness as a core value?

In the outpouring of wonderful e-mails and notes (which I have very much appreciated) some of you have noted that that I am actually setting an example for others. I'm not so sure about that, because in this process I've talked to a number of people who are a lot more conscious about the practice of wellness in their lives than I am. But if it is so, I hope it might cause every one of you to look in the mirror and ask: what am I doing to apply the principles of prevention and renewal in my life? Are they really a priority?

When do you know it's time for renewal? In my case, I came up with seven indicators ... one for each year I've been at the Foundation:

1. When all the waiters at the Argent Hotel in SF not only all recognize you but also automatically bring you an iced tea and know what you want to order before you even say anything.
2. When the guy at the Hertz rental car lot at Burbank Airport who's been checking you in almost every week for the past six years also recognizes you by sight, but is still convinced that your name is "Mr. Thomas."
3. When the code numbers on your Pac Bell calling card are so worn down that you can't read them anymore, but it doesn't matter because you realize that you've actually memorized them.

4. When the latest batch of 80 grant closeout reports lands on your desk and your first response is not “I can’t wait to set aside a day to absorb these in detail ... what an opportunity for professional growth!”
5. When you’ve gotten so good at delegation that it’s been a while since you had to personally deal with angry or tearful calls from denied grantseekers ... and you’re not sure whether that’s a good thing or a bad thing.
6. When you wake up at 2:30 in the morning with this list forming in your head and realize that if you don’t get up and write it down, it’s going to be gone!
7. When you realize that you’ve had the opportunity to hire all the Program Directors at TCWF and that they’re an amazing group of people who are great at what they do... and that it probably doesn’t get any better than this.

One of the most articulate advocates of personal renewal was John Gardner, and his book on that subject is a true classic. About eight years ago, as I was beginning to think about my next step after working at the Irvine Foundation, my dear colleague Francesca Gardner connected me with her father and I got to spend a couple of hours with him on a beautiful Spring afternoon down at Stanford.

Among other things, he gave me three pieces of advice (which in retrospect were all about renewal):

- Look for your next job outside of philanthropy. In particular, do something you’ve never done before, where the learning curve is steep.
- Don’t ever again spend more than 5 years at the same job. It’s not good for you and not good for the organization.
- Seek out opportunities to do more public speaking. In particular, put yourself in situations where you have to persuade your audience to do something or consider something that they might resist.

Needless to say, that was not exactly the kind of advice I was expecting to hear. I was hoping for some tips about climbing to the next rung on the ladder ... but of course he was telling me that it’s not about climbing the ladder. I just wasn’t ready to hear it. And, I must say, I didn’t have the wisdom (or the guts) to do what he advised.

Just like when Luke Skywalker went to see Master Yoda seeking that extra bit of knowledge that would help him harness the Force, and instead was informed that “much to learn, you still have young Skywalker,” I’ve been a slow learner. In fact it’s taken me all these years just to begin to get it.

Do something I've not done before? Who would hire me to do that? Of course, I'd just finished developing a grantmaking program in health, something I had no previous background in. Create my own opportunity? It was outside my comfort zone.

Stay no more than five years? What about retirement? At 44, I had precious little set aside as a nest egg for the future, having "cashed in" my meager retirement contributions as I'd left previous jobs. Are you telling me there's something more important than the perception of financial security?

What I think John Gardner would say if he were with us today is that in addition to those things, what is central to renewal is doing meaningful work ... something that all of us in this room have in common. Our challenge is sustaining ourselves as we seek to serve others. My wish and blessing for you in that regard is a quote from one of John Gardner's speeches which Ruth Holton was kind enough to share with me:

"Meaning is not something you stumble across, like the answer to a riddle or the prize in a treasure hunt. Meaning is something you build into your life. You build it out of your own past, out of your affections and loyalties, out of the experience of humankind as it is passed on to you, out of your own talent and understanding, out of the things you believe in, out of the things and people you love, out of the values for which you are willing to sacrifice something. The ingredients are there. You are the only one who can put them together into that unique pattern that will be your life. Let it be a life that has dignity and meaning for you. If it does, then the particular balance of success or failure is of less account."

Tom David
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