

Time In Between

Jim Eastman — March 13, 2011

November 14, 2008 was my last day of employment.

“Jim, I think we’ve come to the end.” That’s what my boss said after calling me into his office that sunny Friday afternoon, an unseasonably warm afternoon, even by Sacramento standards. I admitted to him I saw this coming.

When my husband Fred and I left Michigan three and a half years earlier, this started off as such an exciting opportunity for me: entering a highly respected architectural firm in a new city, a new state, and a new life. But slowly, life somehow strayed from my intended direction. I ran a gauntlet of nine written and graphic exams to earn my professional license in Michigan, and then sweated (profusely) through an oral exam here to achieve the same in California, all so I could have *more* control over my career. Instead, the opposite has happened. Yes, I’m bitter. What did happen? Did my employer’s needs change? Did mine change? The answer is “Yes” to both.

Losing my job came near the end of 2008, a particularly eventful year for me. The most important event was the death of my mother in June of that year. Though I also saw this coming, I was not prepared for an entire era of my life coming to an end along with her. Dad died almost exactly 16 years earlier; now she was gone. Gone were her witty and heady conversations, her maddeningly bad habits, her zealous celebration of all the love and beauty in the world, and the love and acceptance she held for Fred, just like that which she held for all of her own children. Gone were nearly all of the family friends she and Dad cultivated over the decades. Gone was the house she and the rest of our family called home for 50 years.

The House. The century-old, Victorian Queen Anne, red, Indiana farm house, packed to the rafters with antiques and reproductions from three continents and 500 years, each item precisely placed by my mother to evoke scenes from all the classical literature she filled her life with, ever since she supposedly taught herself how to read at age three. This intense aesthetic immersion, including my parents’ vast classical music collection, was the environment my four siblings and I were raised in. Though our parents never pushed us in any career direction, you can imagine how thrilled Mom was when I announced at age five that I wanted to be an architect!

An architect, like Frank Lloyd Wright, Andrea Palladio, Sir Christopher Wren, Vitruvius, and Mies van der Rohe. Mother did not approve of Mies van der Rohe, but as I learned during my five wonderful years at Ball State University’s College of Architecture and Planning, he was a biggie I couldn’t ignore. In fact, in our assignments, our design studio professors discouraged us from replicating the ancient, literal, passé decorations and flourishes practiced by my pre-modern idols. Thankfully, our professors were not as vehement as nutty Adolf Loos was. Though this Modernist emphasis caused some disappointment in me, I learned to appreciate the language of modern architecture. I was also enthralled by the mechanics of buildings: the structure, the pipes, wires, cladding materials, what windows will do (for good and evil), elevators, and control systems. Even construction technology: how do grumpy, burly, inarticulate construction workers perform the magic of putting all this stuff together? You see, I’m not just the son of an aesthete, I’m also the son of an engineer. For 45 years, Dad worked for Bendix, designing fuel control systems for jet engines—he was an actual rocket scientist.

Subjective aesthetics, objective mechanics, geometry, computer technology, opportunities to make substantial, enduring contributions to a community. That's what being an architect is to me. Once, when I replied to a fellow bus rider who asked what I did, she said, "Wow! An architect." The field of architecture actually has glamour. It seemed a natural fit for me. *I was ready to save the world from bad design!*

But in the latter half of 2008, I was not feeling glamorous. I was depressed, even before I was let go. Depressed to a depth I had never felt before. Deep enough for me to feel as though I had a window into the kind of depression my mother had, which was always like some wicked companion waiting for her in a corner, squelching her worship of the good things in life. A depth of depression that helped me just begin to understand why my brother took his own life.

What was happening to me? For the first time in my life, I lost a job in my chosen career, that for reasons I did not fully understand, I could no longer adequately perform. How did this happen? Was this inevitable? Am I a failure? This shook me to my core. I knew I was in no shape emotionally to return to work for several months after losing my job. But eventually, I spruced up my résumé, portfolio, and other materials, and got a few interviews here and there. But losing my job also just happened to coincide with the recession.

Architecture and the rest of the building industry tend to be among the first to be affected during tough economic times, and among the hardest hit. Jobs in my field evaporated, at least those I thought I was prepared for. You see, with glamour comes competition. Though virtually all of my peers enter architecture for the same reasons I did—you know, to save the world from bad design?—the profession can only support a limited number of us in that role. I'm no design genius. So I and many of my peers wind up as draftsmen (with computer technology today, we're now called "CAD monkeys" by the way). Or we're pigeon-holed as building code researchers, construction administrators, or—God help me—project managers. (I recently took a project management course online, which confirmed my suspicion that I'm not project management material.) The collapsed job market has made the already competitive field of architecture much more so. About the only jobs I still see advertised in my field are for project managers, because like most of my unemployed peers, if we wanted to be project managers, we would have been business majors to begin with instead of architecture students.

So I realized my situation isn't just me. It's not just the divergence of possibly unrealistic expectations I had with my former employer. It's also the economic wrecking ball that I and 30 million others have gotten knocked down by in this country. And I'm one of the lucky ones: I have a loving husband in a steady job with good insurance.

So now I must share the real dirty secret of my situation with you: I like not working. I'm a contented house husband. I start my days accompanying Fred to the bus stop or train station, then enjoy a long walk. I take a nap with the cats. I watch a little daytime TV. Movie theaters, museums, shopping, and bike trails are all minutes from our house. Or I stay home working on creative projects, do a little house cleaning, maybe a simple home-improvement project here and there. Then when it's time for Fred to come home, I throw on a gay cocktail dress and present him his martini as he comes in the door. Not really. Fred hates martinis.

My life is good, but I know it's not sustainable. Fred's job is stressful. His life isn't this good right now. And for it to become this good in the future, I have to get up off the couch and figure out

where my life is going from here for the both of us. So, over the past two and a half years, I've learned how to set up and maintain my own website. I got some therapy, which helped me be less angry, insecure, and anxious about my job loss, and be better prepared to work with a wider array of personalities in my next job environment. I mentioned my project management course to you, which should help me perform better in a project team. Plus, I've seen a career counselor, who both helped me learn more about myself, and helped me find some other fields I'm considering, such as technical writing and graphic design.

But these career choices also turn out to be good representations of my current psychological dilemma. I think I could do well at both of these professions. Technical writing is a growth field, and I think I could develop a decent income from it, but I don't know how much I'm going to really enjoy it over the long haul. Graphic design, on the other hand, has been an enduring joy to me, but it too is a very competitive field that can support only a limited number of actual creative designers; how can I get my foot in this door?

This leads me to the big question that has been plaguing me for some years now: will I ever enjoy being gainfully employed again? I should. Others do this, my dad did, probably many of you. I used to enjoy my profession; I started out as a CAD monkey. I truly adored coaxing the geometry of a building from a computer every day, and still do. But with architecture schools continuing to produce people who are highly capable in this skill during today's still disastrous labor market, there's now a glut of available people with my skills and interests.

Is enjoying my career asking too much? It's common for many people to slog through their work lives in a melancholy fog with the understanding that sacrifices must be made to survive independently today in our society. I'm sure many of you have experienced this too, and you may be thinking, "Boy, is this kid a whiney slacker." Well, I wouldn't be whining if I didn't see so many people living my goals; people who are lucky enough to have skills and talent that is both appreciated and compensated by others.

I feel this kind of appreciation here at UCC. I am lucky that I now have the time to contribute my skills and interests to you, my friends and church family, and you affirm my efforts consistently. Though I obviously don't get a dime for doing any of this, still, in the process, I grow. My opportunities to be a facilitator for Daytimers and Chalice Circles has made me a better listener and negotiator, and has improved my organizational skills. My time with the Committee on Ministry has shown me how complex our interrelationships can be, how much we need each other, and how much we can give each other. As I stand before you, I'm developing my presentation skills! Outside of my church life, I've learned (and am continuing to learn) better ways to budget my time and priorities, to balance my needs with others', and my creative projects are helping me sharpen both my computer skills and design skills.

I don't think I've exactly been languishing during my time off. Though I've set a slow pace, I hope this time in between careers is serving as a quiet time for me to refresh emotionally and intellectually, and to reevaluate my dreams and abilities. I recently read a quote from former CBS News President Fred Friendly who said, "You're never going to do the work you most want to do until you do it for yourself." Years from now, I will look back on this time fondly. I don't really know where my career is going, or what new things I have yet to learn. But I do know I'm now much better prepared to face my future challenges than I was two and a half years ago, and that there's a lot more to me than just my career.

Life is full of balancing acts. How much must we sacrifice, and what should we expect in return? How much can we enjoy now, and how much must we pay later? These are questions every responsible adult must face, and if hard work alone were enough, we could answer them reliably. But we'll never be able to entirely, because in our unfathomably complex world, there's always an element of luck that makes lives stray from their intended directions. I'm betting that with patience, flexibility, and faith, a diversion in one's life plan can be something wonderful.

Perhaps Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" would be an apt metaphor for my life now, if you allow me a slight adjustment in the last stanza:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one [that gave me peace],
And that has made all the difference.