



Coping With Layoffs and Other Failures

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Your Life's Work:

A Guide To A Creating A Spiritual And Successful Work Life

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Chapter Three

Coping with Layoffs and Other Failures

Sometimes, even when we think we're doing everything right, life throws us a curveball. These days, many, if not most, of us have either been threatened by the possibility of a layoff or have actually found ourselves without a job as a result of downsizing. When we are faced with the inability to meet our financial commitments, it is very difficult to keep a positive outlook and move forward with confidence and hope. Just the hint that our jobs are not secure fills us with fear and existential dread. Perhaps it is at this moment that we are forced to face the extent to which we have defined ourselves and our self-worth by our jobs. The question of how we will be able to pay our rent sends us into a quagmire of anxiety and despair that even the most positive-thinking people among us have difficulty overcoming.

I grew up in Pittsburgh, and in my childhood the city's economy was still dependent on a strong steel-making industry that employed many thousands of people. In the 1970s, however, the steel industry, once the pride of America, was no longer considered viable or competitive in the international arena. My father worked for the steelworkers' union, which is headquartered in Pittsburgh, and our family witnessed how the breakdown of this industry affected the lives of the steelworkers whom my father represented.

It was a sad time. For many steelworkers, making steel was not only a job, it was a family tradition. Generations ago, the steel mill was the only game in town for immigrants of many nationalities who had come to the United States to make a better life for themselves. The journey of these people to transform their status as low-paid immigrant labor into middle-class industrial workers was a hard-fought battle. Just as the goal had been reached, they found themselves dispensable. The fundamental issue for those affected by this unfortunate set of circumstances was not whether or not the dismantling of the steel industry should have happened but rather that it did happen.

There was no easy answer to the question, If I'm not a steelworker, who am I? Not unsurprisingly, there were many who didn't immediately make the adjustment to the new economic reality; many slipped into despair, believing that it was too late for them to retrain for other jobs. For those families who were broken by these events, it was the next generation who would adapt to the changing times, but not without have first learned the fearful lesson of their elders. Of course, there were many who rebounded and sought retraining or further education with or without help from government agencies. They may have resented their situation, but they did not allow their lives to be broken. They valued themselves too highly. They did not consider themselves merely as steelworkers, but as worthwhile human beings.

Unfortunately, it wasn't only the steel industry that was affected. Most other blue-collar workers have also found their lives permanently changed. While these workers were confronting these painful lessons, many who were better educated and working in more "prestigious" white-collar jobs did not show much compassion, sympathy, or respect for their plight. They did not see that we are all connected through the vast chain of being and that one person's struggle is everyone's struggle. They did not see that the changing economic landscape was about to land right on their doorstep. Now the entire workforce of our country is facing the same situation that the steelworks and other industrial workers confronted a few decades ago. How will we adapt? Jim's story might give us some direction.

Jim, age fifty, is currently a freelance writer working out of his home office in the Southwest. Prior to his writing career, he was the director of administration in an architectural firm in the Northeast. He lost his job when his firm merged with another firm. When it first became clear that his job was not secure, Jim felt like a failure and remembered his father's difficulty finding work after being laid off as an auto worker in Detroit. He painfully recalled how his dad's life had been crushed by his inability to rebound after this event. Jim couldn't help himself. Faced with the loss of his own job, he was angry and filled with self-righteous indignation. Next, after reality set in, he began to panic about what his next career move should be. In contrast to the situation faced by his father, Jim knew that he could probably find

another job in his field and continue to earn a very good salary. But this option didn't appeal to him on a gut level and made him feel even more depressed. After much fearful internal deliberation, worry, and doubt, he decided that his next move should be one that would satisfy his longtime desire to work for himself and to write. After speaking with his wife and children, Jim decided that what the family needed was a complete change in lifestyle.

“We sold our home and rented a house in Arizona, where I could earn a living as a freelance writer and pursue my lifelong dream of writing a novel. At first I was petrified of such a huge change and how my family would react once we had made the move. But I realized that if I was ever going to satisfy my need to create, I would have to take the risk. I could either look at the loss of my previous career as a horrible twist of fate or as an opportunity provided me by the universe to satisfy what my Soul had been urging me to do for the past ten years.

“To be honest, the first year in Arizona was tough. Every hour on the hour I doubted my ability to pursue my dream and worried whether I had made the right decision. Eventually, however, it became clear to me that I was the one setting up obstacles to success and that my wife and kids were very happy because I had finally become an active member of the family. I was shocked when I realized that by meeting my own needs and

communicating them to my wife and children, I was also meeting their need to develop a deeper connection with me.

“I started writing articles on administration issues for trade magazines and doing consulting work to make extra money. I also started my novel. When I realized that I was happy for the first time in my life, my anxiety disappeared. Every day I thank the universe for providing me with the opportunity to change my life.”

CONFRONTING YOUR SITUATION HEAD-ON

Let's face it, when we are faced with a layoff, we feel like a failure, even if the situation is completely beyond our control. When Jim first realized that he was about to be jobless, his first reaction was flashback to fear. He couldn't help but remember how his father's life was destroyed after he was laid off. He couldn't help but project the fear that his father felt when faced with such devastating circumstance onto his own life. That's what the mind does. It doesn't mean to be cruel. Because its sense of reality is dominated completely by the past and because it only wants to ensure our self-preservation at all costs, it has no other recourse but to replay the failures and defeats of the past as a way to warn us of danger ahead. When circumstances arise that threaten its survival, it strikes back the only way it knows how: through anger, indignation and panic.

That's okay – for a while. So get it out of your system. Get made, be self-righteous, blame everything ad everyone for your circumstances. Throw a big fit. Feel sorry for yourself. Cry and scream and curse the economy, the politicians, God, your mother and father, your first-grade teacher. Get a punching bag or engage in some activity that requires that you expend a lot of energy, and release the pain and fear.

One note of caution is in order. Taking your pain out on your spouse, loved ones, and especially your children can only lead to greater pain and

misery. When we take out our feelings on children, we sometimes do irreparable harm. It is no great secret that children are very impressionable. They also understand more about what is going on than we give them credit for. By honestly sharing your feelings with them, you can gain greater insight into what is really important.

Children learn to react to life based on how their parents or caregivers react to life. Do you want them to see you as the sort of person who cannot control him or herself? Do you want them to see you as someone who is easily broken? Do you want them to fear life? Or would you prefer that they see you as the sort of person who has great self-control? Wouldn't it be better to teach them how to adapt to the changing circumstances of life with faith, hope and honesty?

RESPONDING TO FAILURE

After we release our initial feelings of anger, indignation, and panic, we come to a crossroads. We can either see our circumstances as a horrible twist of fate and keep the negativity going, or we can see the situation with which we are faced as an opportunity provided us by the creative power of the universe to move forward and evolve.

When we give complete power to our minds, we have no other alternative but to see ourselves as the puppets of fate, as victims. For many years I was in the job placement and recruitment field. I saw many people

come and go, and the main factor that determined who got what job, and in what timeframe, was the attitude of the person looking for a job. I must admit that I really enjoyed the hard cases because I am such a perfectionist that I figured that anyone could place the perfect candidates, but who would take care of the rest, if not me? One candidate, though, really pushed me right into the arms of my Soul.

Susan, a secretary was laid off when her company went through downsizing, had been unemployed for about six months and was unable to find another job. She was miserable and couldn't understand why she was still jobless. On paper, she had excellent skills. Out of desperation, Susan borrowed money from her parents and decided to seek further education as a solution to her problem. I met her after she graduated from a three-month paralegal training program.

As she sat in my office during our initial interview, I remember thinking that I had never met a more defensive and negative person in all my life. I was so put off by her that I could barely muster up the energy to ask her questions. Her response to any question that I posed began and ended with an attack on some person, place, or situation. The world was against her, and it wasn't her fault.

Despite my personal and vain quest to be Mother Teresa of the placement field, I was about to admit defeat and tell her that I didn't think I

could do much for her, when she began to cry. When I asked her why she was crying, she told me that she was so tired of failing, but she didn't know what to do about it. Something inside me screamed, "Move in for the kill, you idiot!" Against my better intellectual judgment, I got up from my chair, put my arm around her, and told her that she had come to the right place. I would help her find a job if she would open her heart and her mind and be willing to see her life from a new perspective. Sobbing, she agreed.

Susan did not change overnight. Every day for a month she tested my patience by calling to complain, whine, and moan. I listened politely, but with clenched teeth I forced myself to tell her what a great person she was, how courageous she was, and how much she had to offer. Finally she softened up. I had been able to arrange a job interview for her with someone I knew wouldn't kill me if Susan acted like the victim of the century. I told Susan about the interview, but told her that in order to get the job, she would have to make a leap of faith.

I took a risk and asked this most negative of people whom she admired most in the world and why. She thought for a few moments and then responded that it was her deceased grandmother, because despite the fact that she had such a hard life, she was a caring, thoughtful, and loving individual who had always been there for her. I almost fell off my chair? When I regained my composure, I told her to keep the image of her grandmother firmly in her mind as we went over some questions that she

might be asked at the interview. Despite a few glitches, Susan responded to the questions with a whole new attitude.

As we concluded our discussion, I could tell that she felt much better about herself. She said, “Do you mean to tell me that all I have to do is act like my grandmother?” Something inside me said, No, act like who you really are. Susan got the job, and I got further into spirituality.

What if we don’t need to put obstacles in our path? What if we don’t need to go through some long, drawn-out process filled with worry, doubt and panic to see that every failure is an opportunity in disguise?

HERE COMES THE SUN . . .

The key to spiritual power is to be able to change negative emotion into positive energy at will. Jim struggled with his emotions and found out that the process wasn’t easy, due to the deep hold fear had over him. Transmuting energy is not a one-time event, it is an ongoing journey. A recent day in my life proved this to me.

For some reason, I woke up in a bad mood. As I was drinking my first cup of coffee, I was immediately disturbed as the phone rang. It was a good friend who wanted to complain. I not only listened to her complain, I joyfully joined in by complaining about everything and everyone. It felt so good to

complain. But halfway through the conversation, a voice inside me asked me why I was being so negative. The sun was out, the apartment was clean, I was having people over for dinner that night and knew that I'd have a good time. What was wrong with me? I changed direction and started talking more positively. So did my friend. I got off the phone feeling like Superwoman.

A few hours later, I went out to buy groceries for my dinner party. As I was walking down the street, I saw someone who lived in my building. I immediately got angry because this man never speaks to me and always acts as if he doesn't see me when we run into each other on the street. I decided to fight fire with fire and to ignore him before he got the chance to ignore me. For about a minute I felt great as I wallowed in my meaningless vengeance. Then it dawned on me. Maybe he would have spoken to me if I hadn't acted like an idiot. Even if he didn't, just what was stopping me from saying hello to him? Maybe he was just shy. I was smiling at my own stupidity, when I ran into another man from my building. This time I went out of my way to say hello. He seemed so happy to see me, and even though we really didn't know each other very well, he gave me a huge smile and said how great I looked. I felt like Superwoman once again.

Three hours later, as my friends were supposed to arrive for dinner, the phone rang. They were going to be an hour late. I hung up the phone really annoyed. I called them every name in the book, after which my boyfriend,

who was the one preparing the dinner, asked why I was so irritated since he was the one who should be annoyed and wasn't. I sat down on the couch and relaxed for a moment. So what if my friends were late? It wasn't the end of the world after all. All-out nuclear war was not about to break out. I smiled my Superwoman smile and turned on some music. A few minutes later the buzzer rang. My friends were able to make it to our apartment earlier than they'd expected. We all had a great time and when I went to bed that night, I was exhausted but happy.

These examples may seem trivial, but they are not. Every day is not a Broadway musical. Some days, every second tests our ability to transmute the negative into the positive, especially when we find ourselves faced with looking for a new job or beginning a new career. It is virtually impossible to act like a Soul every minute of every day, but we must realize that nothing worth having comes without practice. Simply put, those who endure, win.

Maggie, a very dear friend of mine, recently lost her job as a legal recruiter when the law firm where she worked dissolved. Even though she had a few months to get used to the idea, she was depressed and angry when she woke up that first morning with nowhere to go. Like Jim, she knew that while she could most definitely find another job in her field, she didn't really want to keep doing the same old thing. What she wanted was to get out of the law firm environment and get a job in a corporation as a recruiter.

Maggie's desire to switch gears from a legal environment to a corporate environment doesn't seem like such a hard thing to do given the fact that as a legal recruiter, she already had close to ten years of recruiting experience. But in today's overly structured marketplace, it is harder than it seems. "Once a legal recruiter, always a legal recruiter," was the ongoing refrain Maggie heard from the headhunters with whom she was working. There were many people, including Maggie, however, who knew that what she wanted was clearly not beyond the realm of possibility.

She had her good days and her bad days, but she persevered. She came to the conclusion that if the headhunters weren't going to be able to help her, she would just have to help herself. She would have to overcome the doubt place din her mind by those who seemingly knew more than she did. She didn't do this by repressing her fear or worry; rather, she simply granted herself permission to devote equal time to faith and hope.

As a recruiter and as a person, Maggie had always gone out of her way to help others to find jobs by using her contacts within and outside the legal profession. Even though she found it uncomfortable to network on her own behalf, she pushed past her discomfort and began making calls to everyone she knew, and it paid off. After a few weeks of pursuing her new course of action, she arranged for an informational interview with a recruiter at a major investment firm who was an acquaintance of a friend.

This recruiter took a liking to Maggie and, despite her lack of corporate recruiting experience, arranged an interview for her with the head of corporate recruiting. While she didn't get the job, all of her old doubts and fears returned. But she kept going and through another friend scheduled another interview with the human resources manager of an accounting firm. She didn't get this job either, simply because the position had been temporarily put on hold. She continued to struggle with doubt, anxiety, and worry and began to think that she might as well return to the legal environment. She noticed, however, that even though her faith in her desire to change direction in her career was fading, it had not completely disappeared. She decided to give herself a little more time. Then it happened. The investment firm called to offer her a different position. She took the job.

Within two weeks of her starting work as a corporate recruiter, two of the headhunters who hadn't been able to help her and who doubted that she'd be able to succeed, called her at her new job. It seemed that they now had corporate recruiting positions for which she would be suitable. It's funny how that works, isn't it?

RISK-TAKING AS A CREATIVE, SPIRITUAL PROCESS

Moving back to Jim for a minute, once he got past his anger and moved into a calm place, he could see that there had been something inside of him that

had been urging him for a long time to pursue his dream of writing and working for himself. For Jim, the ramifications of his dream meant moving his family from their comfortable surroundings in the Northeast to the less expensive Southwest. Symbolically speaking, in order to pursue his dream, he had to make the decision to become a stranger in a strange land. He had to venture into the unknown territory of the Southwest and the unknown territory of his Soul at the same time.

But before we can take the steps necessary to do what we want to do, we first must recognize that each of us has a dream. From my experience in the recruitment field, I have found that this first step is actually the most difficult. As a rule, we are not encouraged to pursue what has heart and meaning for us. We are encouraged by our parents, our high school and college placement offices, and others who supposedly know what is best for us to get a job and to make money to support ourselves. When we listen to those around us who discourage us from doing what we want to do, we sell ourselves short and we become angry and resentful on a deep level and even begin to deny that we have dreams.

Several years ago, I was helping Meg, a paralegal in her late twenties, find a new job. She was intelligent, had a great resume, excellent references, and was making a decent salary, but she had been unhappy in all her jobs so far and didn't know why. When I asked Meg what her dream job would be, she looked at me with a blank expression that indicated to me

that she had no idea. I then asked her why she had pursued her current occupation, and she responded, “Because I was told that I could make good money.”

I thought for a few seconds and then asked her what she had wanted to be when she was a child. After several moments, Meg replied, “I wanted to be an artist, but my parents discouraged me from pursuing art because it didn’t pay.” I asked her if she already had all the money she needed, would she pursue her dream of becoming an artist? She replied, “Of course, but I can’t base my life on a fantasy. I need to make money.” It was then that it dawned on me. People do not pursue their dreams because they think they can’t. The sad truth is that if you do not give yourself permission to pursue what you want to do, you will never be satisfied with any job.

Of course, in reality making money is a real concern. When we have the courage to imagine what our lives would be like if money were not part of life’s equation, however, our dreams move from being trapped in our unconscious awareness, where we can figure out if it is possible to achieve them. Our childhood dreams do not go away, because they live within our dormant Souls, which want nothing more than to express themselves in the real world. We have material needs and we have spiritual and creative needs, and both need to be met if we want to be happy.

We can use a layoff or the loss of a job for other reasons to help ourselves to evolve. But we must be honest with ourselves if we want to transform failure into triumph. After we realize that we have dreams, we must ask ourselves whether or not we have the courage to do what it will take to realize them. Are we willing to compromise? Are we willing to do what must be done in order to get where we want to go?

We know from Jim's story that he was willing to make the changes necessary to pursue his goal. After he discussed the situation with his wife and family, they all agreed that the risk was worth taking. Jim didn't just jump right into his new career in one fell swoop, though. He had to figure out a creative way to satisfy both his material needs and his spiritual needs at the same time. He decided to use the expertise he had acquired in his former career to make money by consulting and writing articles on issues on which he was already an expert. Whatever time was left was devoted to beginning his novel. He was scared, but he knew that he was halfway home so he pushed past his fear and continued to move forward.

Just because all of us can't pick up and move our families out of state and begin consulting work doesn't mean that there are not creative solutions to our problems. Let's shift back to Meg to see what the average person with an average job can do to meet both sets of needs.

I noticed that Meg began to become more frightened of finding a job after she allowed herself to contemplate her childhood dream of becoming an artist. Realizing that she had a dream did not set her free; it only made her feel like more of a failure because not only was she unhappy in her current career, but also she hadn't had the courage to pursue what she really loved. This step of the process is very difficult and naturally leads to conflicting feelings. She was now not just jobless, she was full-fledged failure both professionally and personally. She had a decision to make. She could either ignore her desire to pursue art one more time, or she could make a plan that would incorporate both sets of needs. We talked about her situation, and she decided that it wasn't yet time to pursue her dream. She simply asked me to help her to find another paralegal position. This time, however, she said that she wanted a job that didn't require as much overtime. I got the hint. She wanted time to think about what she was going to do and time to ease into make a change.

Meg was successful at finding a new job with less overtime, and for a while she seemed to be a little happier. About six months later, however, she called me and said that she was miserable even though the job didn't require much overtime. I asked her if she had done anything to pursue her art, and she said that she hadn't. I suggested that she might want to make one small step in that direction. Meg sounded annoyed and told me that it was her job that was the problem. I told her to keep me posted.

A few months later, Meg called to tell me that she had enrolled in an inexpensive drawing course taught by professional artists and that she was having a great time. She also told me that she was planning to take another drawing course the next semester and that she was thinking of trying to get a job in an art gallery so that she could be around art all the time. I told her that I thought her plan was a great idea. Within a year, Meg was working in a gallery and was continuing her artists studies. Her goal is to have her own show within a few years.

Meg's story can be everyone's story. We don't need to make huge changes in our lives in order to pursue our dreams, and we don't need to do everything in one grand motion. We do, however, need to recognize that we are more than moneymaking machines, that we have dreams, and that our Souls have the right to express themselves in the material world. Once small step leads to bigger steps which ultimately lead to dreams fulfilled.

THERE ARE NO ACCIDENTS: ALL NEEDS ARE FULFILLED

Sometimes what we call accidents can give us clues as to not only what we are asking life to give to us, but what our Souls might be urging us to do. In spiritual terms, what we call accidents are really events we do not understand due to a lack of complete knowledge about the way things work on the cosmic scale. Once we accept that we live in a lawful universe that is

governed by the law of cause and effect, we can see that we create the circumstances in our lives based on what we have asked life to give to us.

When we look at our lives in an objective manner, we may find that we are enmeshed in situations that we cannot recollect having created. This is because we are unaware that we ask for things on both the conscious and unconscious levels. We may think that pursuing a certain career is the right thing to do because we have been told that it is, but our Souls, which are the guardians of our unconscious dreams, might have other ideas. We are divided within ourselves and don't even know it. Sometimes our Souls, and not our minds, urge us on by creating "failure" because it is the only way to shake us up and get us on the right track. The key is to become aware of our dreams and aspirations on a conscious level so that we can see why the so-called accidents of life occur and what they really mean.

I had just finished my junior year in college and didn't have a summer job lined up. I called the Federal Reserve Bank of Pittsburgh, where I had worked for several summers, and even though I wasn't thrilled at spending another summer doing mindless work that I had no interest in, I was confident that they could find a spot for me. When I learned that they couldn't give me a job, I was pretty shaken up, because I didn't have an alternative plan and I desperately needed money in order to survive during my last year of college. After several days of wracking my brain to figure out a way to make some money, the phone rang. It was the mother of a good

friend of mine who wanted to know if I would be interested in looking after her elderly mother, Lydia, for the summer. Even though I had never worked in such a capacity before, I knew that I liked elderly people and I figured I had nothing to lose since the money was equal to what I would have earned at the bank.

I could go on forever about this job, but suffice it to say that working with Lydia was the best thing that ever happened to me. At the beginning, Lydia was not very easy to get along with. She was suffering from the aftereffects of a stroke, was on a lot of medication, and was not in the best of spirits most of the time. At first I treated her as if she were my patient and I knew what was good for her. But after a while I realized that I was on the wrong track. Something inside me told me that what she needed was not a caretaker, but a friend. I stopped acting like Supernurse and began treating her like a person. When she got angry and yelled at me, I yelled back at her. When she cried, I didn't ignore her feelings; I asked her to explain what was making her unhappy. Our relationship continued to develop, and by the end of the summer it dawned on me that I loved this ornery, frail little woman.

About halfway through the summer, I got another call out of the blue. I was asked to sing the lead in an original children's opera, something that I really wanted to do. Because my schedule with Lydia was flexible and because my friend's mother, for whom I worked, is a wonderful person, I was

able to pursue my signing. I never would have been able to pursue this opportunity had I been working at the bank.

It took me many years to understand that my Soul had rerouted me that summer away from a job I didn't like but believed I needed, into a job that taught me that my future was working with people, not numbers. I also learned that it is possible to work and pursue creative and artistic aspirations at the same time.

NOT VICTIM, BUT VICTOR

The first key to becoming a victor is learning to practice patience. It is my personal belief that the world is populated by two types of people, the tortoises and the hares.

The tortoise and the hare are running a race. The hare, by nature, is the fastest of the two and is convinced that he will win the race if he just goes faster than the tortoise, which isn't too difficult. He doesn't find the race terribly challenging, however, so he wastes time by performing all sorts of tricks and taking many detours to convince himself and others not only how fast he is, but also just how clever he is. He expends so much energy in his efforts to prove his greatness that he loses sight of his goal, becomes tired, and falls asleep just before the finish line.

The tortoise, on the other hand, conserves his energy as he plots along, taking each step as it comes. He remains untroubled by the hare, who seems to be traveling the path faster than he is. Because he is guided by Spirit, he is unconcerned with outcomes. He knows that it is the journey that counts. He moves through rough terrain in the same manner as he moves through easy terrain, serenely, confidently. He knows that he'll reach his goal if he takes it easy and if he does what he is supposed to do. When he arrives at the finish line, the tortoise steps over the sleeping hare to victory. But even then he doesn't cheer for himself or ask for applause from the crowd. He turns back and pulls the sleeping hare across the finish line with him, simply because it is the right thing to do.

The second key to becoming a victor is adaptability, a beautiful lesson I learned from my mentors, Al and Jackie Kayata. Just as people are usually either hares or tortoises, they are also either orchids or weeds. Orchids are very beautiful and very sensitive and do not live a long time. In florist shops, they must be placed away from the other flowers and plants, in a climate-controlled environment, or they will wither and die. Weeds, however, are not beautiful in an ordinary way, but they flourish everywhere, even through the cracks in the sidewalk in the middle of urban jungles. When you pull them out, they grow back. They are oblivious to their external surroundings. They are fearless; they are adaptable; they cannot be destroyed.

Who are you, a tortoise, or a hare, a weed or an orchid?