

Bridging...

The G.A.P. Newsletter

For Members of the Guild of (Financially) Accessible Practitioners

Issue #3

Fall, 1994

MEMBER PROFILE

My Road to Physical and Fiscal Fitness

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Early morning meetings, middle of the night distress calls, no lunch, late for dinner . . . Sound familiar? This was my life as a director of intensive care and coronary care units who was on the fast track to becoming the youngest female hospital administrator in the nation. Outwardly my life looked ideal. I was young, vivacious and successful; the proverbial brass ring was within my reach. Life for me was a series of 6-month, 1-year, 5-year and 10-year goals, and I was committed to reaching them whatever the consequences. Inside, however, I felt boxed in and stressed out; nightmarish schedules, institutional productivity demands and budgets had brought me to a state of burn-out. Unable to reconcile these two disparate aspects of myself, I ignored the inner messages and concentrated on achieving my aspirations and accumulating the trappings of success.

I didn't notice that as my income increased, the quality of my life decreased. Job promotions brought yet more demands on my time. Pushed by these demands, I tried to save time by eating out, having my laundry done, hiring someone to paper my living room walls, and purchasing an ever-increasing number of "time-saving" devices.

Then one day, Life brought me up short. In a period of 12 hours I (1) was diagnosed with a terminal disease and given less than a year to live, (2) found out that due to my illness, my hospital position had been given to someone else, and (3) was informed that a burglar had stolen most of my personal possessions. Instead of feeling devastated I responded with professional detachment and immediately began calculating how I could put my life back on track. But there was this tiny breath of relief, somewhere inside of me, that said, "Ah, a way off the treadmill."

And so, obedient to the death sentence my doctor had delivered, I began to put my life in order. With neither regrets nor resistance, I accepted the reality of my situation and prepared to die. In the process I began to reflect on my life, my values, and my sense of self. I saw mirrored back to me a picture not only of myself, but of many doctors, nurses, therapists and other health-care professionals I had known. What I saw was not pretty, but it was true.

I, like so many of my colleagues, was putting on a front of compassion and caring, but underneath lay self-serving motives, like power, prestige and financial gain. I saw how far I had strayed from living my professed humanitarian values and genuinely wanting to ease the pain and suffering of those who were critically ill.

I had come to peace with dying, but I was not at peace with the life I had created. Faced with my unrest and unhappiness, I made a commitment to live a values-based life for whatever amount of time I had left. There was no cookbook on how one does this, so I began to chart my own course.

The first step was identifying what was important to me. What were the basic qualities and ingredients of a successful life? In other words, what legacy did I want to leave behind?

When I became willing to explore these questions honestly, I was stunned by the answers. I didn't want people to remember me for my successful career, or for the amount of money or possessions I had. I wanted to be remembered as a person who had contributed to the lives of those around her, who had loved and was loved, and who had given freely of her time and talents. *These* were my values. But the gulf between these values and

the reality of my life was a large one. In order to become the person I wanted to be, I had to step outside the cultural definition of what it meant to be successful. I had to change the patterns of my life that were keeping me from living my values.

During the year that followed my diagnosis I identified and worked hard to change my own destructive ways of being. One of my harmful patterns was the way I handled money. I realized that I had spent many thousands of dollars to impress the people around me, to feel secure, to alleviate my depression, and to assuage my guilt over having more than I needed. These motives for earning and spending had been a large part of what kept me on the treadmill of seeking better jobs and higher salaries. I had joined the earn-more/spend-more American money-go-round. And now I wanted off. If I had only a short time to live, I wanted to learn how to have every aspect of my life in alignment with my values. I saw that fiscal wellness was a part of physical wellness and true healing.

At about this time I was invited to one of those money seminars that seem to abound, and despite my skepticism about such things, I decided to go. This one was called, *Transforming Your Relationship with Money and Achieving Financial Independence*, and was given by Joe Dominguez. It didn't take long for me to recognize that this seminar was different, and I was jolted into a new awareness. Here was someone not telling me how to get rich quicker, but talking about a way to gain back my life, my time and my creativity—and offering the tools to do it. (His nine-step program to high-level financial integration and wellness is now available as the New York Times best-seller, *Your Money or Your Life*, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin, which was reviewed in the last issue of this newsletter.)

The first thing I learned was that I paid for the money I earned with my life energy—in other words, my time; and when I spent money I was spending my precious hours of life energy. For example, if I bought a \$100 dress and was earning \$20/hour I had to work 5 hours for that one article of clothing (which all too often would hang in my closet to be worn once or twice before I got rid of it). This awareness was revolutionary for me. It

transformed my relationship with money and helped me bring my lifestyle into alignment with my values.

Following the steps of this program had a profound impact on my life and my health. I began to take my identity from the values I was living, rather than from my job, the model of my car, the size of my home or the number of silk blouses I had.

During this time I was defining what a life of quality meant to me and learning how to live that life. As I became a more integrated person, my disease process changed and I didn't die as expected. I discovered that one of the secrets to health was engaging in true service—the giving that emanates from a spontaneous upwelling of the soul.

Reconstructing my relationship with money freed me to serve and to become as inventive and creative as I could. With my creativity and energy freed up I was able to focus on an area I was becoming increasingly passionate about: the transformation of health care and the acceptance of the mind/body interaction as a key component. I saw that sound medical research was needed—research that would help lay the foundation for shifting the paradigm of health care from a focus on illness and curing to one of wellness and caring. And thus the *Amnorphic Lateral Sclerosis Patient Profile Project* was born.

The study was staffed entirely by volunteers—systems analysts, statisticians, physicians, nurses, patients and families all gave of their time and expertise. The result: a study estimated to cost between \$200,000 and \$300,000 was completed for less than \$15,000. The first paper from this research was published in the January 1994 issue of *Archives of Neurology*.

This transformation of my relationship with money and time was an important part of my developing a sound mind/body interaction. Living my values reduced my inner stress, led to a re-evaluation of what was important, decreased my drive to achieve a high salary and thus a certain societal standing, and helped me to see my true worth as an individual.

My illness was the catalyst for this journey to fiscal wellness. Today I am alive and healthy, living a life based on quality rather than quantity. And, more important, living a life where my dream of being a humanitarian, helping to create a healthy world of healthy people, has come true.