

# Narrative Reflections on Occupational Transitions

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## 1. Introduction

No sooner had I agreed to write the inaugural work transition column than fate intervened. I was touched by two dramatic examples of successful transitions related to a topic very dear to me, the natural environmental. The individuals whose stories I heard described the role that nature played in aiding their transition to alternate work following life-changing injuries that necessitated a significant change in occupation. Both of these individuals also indicated how important work was to their overall health and well being and how this feeling was not accomplished until they were alone with nature and away from the over-stimulation of the urban environment. Environmentalism is a hot topic that affects many people in many ways, but we often forget the significant curative role that immersion in nature can play for many people. The following story resonated with me and provides yet another reason for conservation of the natural environment. Even for those who do not enjoy nature, we must all learn to let the client lead the way, as most often they do in fact know best.

## 2. Exploring nature's lessons: Kevin's story

My plan in life was to work in Asia as a computer programmer – in distributive networking specifically. I had finished an undergraduate degree but felt to be marketable in Asia I needed the master's degree. I think my reason for studying computer science was I felt I could get a well-paid job. I was enrolled in a 12-month program but had yet to complete my proposal. I was working as a teaching assistant and a research assistant and doing a little bit of programming work off-campus at the local college. I played soccer and spent time

with my friends. I know that after the accident one of the lawyers interviewed my academic supervisor who apparently reported that I “wasn't the typical computer geek”.

I think I was more interactive and liked to be around people. Maybe I should have been studying business or psychology or something. I grew up beside a conservation area. I remember one time thinking to myself, “how cool would it be to know the story of the animal that left these tracks in the snow”. I also worked a lot with kids growing up. When I was about 12 I started working as an exercise buddy for an autistic boy. I also worked at summer camps as a counselor. I enjoyed teaching kids.

I had celebrated my 25th birthday at the end of October and my sister came to visit about a week later. She wanted to take me out for birthday cake. We had just finished and were crossing the street at a pedestrian crosswalk. I was ahead and a car failed to stop. I was hit and my sister had to witness the whole thing. That has really affected her. Nobody thinks about that part. She really suffered but I am grateful she was there because she insisted in the emergency department that I had landed hard on my head and that there was no way I did not have a head injury. I lost consciousness initially but by the time the ambulance arrived I was coherent and oriented so they only focussed on my leg fracture. When my sister insisted they needed to check out my head they relented and sent me for a CT scan. On the way to the scan my whole right side went flaccid and my left pupil dilated. I ended up having to have the hematoma in my brain surgically repaired.

About 3 months after the surgery during a follow-up visit the neurosurgeon said to me “This was meant to be and it happened for a reason. You were put here to do something special”. That gave me a huge sense of

purpose. His words were very powerful to me. The neurosurgeon won't take credit for saving my life with those words but truly that was a critical point for me.

The accident happened at the beginning of November and I was discharged home to my mother's house in a town about an hour away. By January I insisted on moving back to an apartment on my own with the intention of resuming my studies. It did not take long to realize that just living on my own was a challenge, forget school. I came to accept that rehabilitation was now my full-time job. I was considered competitively unemployable and returning to school to complete my master's degree in computer science was not a viable option. Even the simplest task, like choosing a box of cereal in the grocery store, would overwhelm me. I couldn't do basic problem solving.

I got a dog and met another man with a dog at a park. I did not realize at the time that he was actually a mentor but he gradually got me interested in walking on trails and going into the woods. I realized that being in the woods was less stimulating than urban environments. I was able to relax and felt less anxious. It enabled me to focus and pay attention better. He told me about the naturalist's courses and got me interested in learning more. I felt very motivated by these activities. Although my therapists did not suggest doing these activities when told about them they were very supportive. Some of the courses required that I fly and that was a massive challenge for a head-injured person. However, the nature courses had prepared me as I had learned to do map reading and non-technical orienteering. I used those skills to find my way through airports. I actually downloaded maps of airports, studied the maps and planned my route before leaving on trips. But these were skills I learned on nature courses and I was seeing how they helped me in everyday life.

My first "aha" moment came while attending a wolf-tracking course in Idaho. The instructor told me I should start a nature awareness school of my own. I had not considered it all before that moment. Then the idea began to materialize into a real possibility when I met the co-founder of the nature awareness schools in Vermont. This man was a highly respected 85 year old elder and talking to a group of about 5 people. But he singled out only me when he suggested I start my own school. That was such an honour. When I told him I didn't have any teaching certificate or skills he nearly jumped out of his chair. I will never forget what he said to me. "You don't need those skills, you just need to love those kids and they will respect you".

My problem was that I felt uncomfortable around people I didn't know well. I didn't like to go out with

my wife to parties or anything because inevitably the topic of "what do you do" comes up and I was ashamed at having to say that I didn't work. I have to credit the Cornerstone Clubhouse and Brain Injury Association for developing those interpersonal and social skills: for giving me the confidence to interact with all kinds of people. The Clubhouse philosophy is very democratic and member driven so that members get to take charge of things they are interested in. It provided an opportunity for me to become more comfortable and less anxious in social situations that I was then able to expand beyond the Clubhouse. For example I was given a chance to plan camping trips and do mentoring with other members. I also cannot thank the executive director enough for allowing me to accompany her to conferences and plan survival conferences. She was a real mentor for me. I have woven much of the Clubhouse philosophy into my new school. I now volunteer at the Clubhouse, which is important to me. I would like to see a Clubhouse in every city.

The final "aha" moment was actually making the school happen. I had had the seed planted for starting the nature awareness school but didn't really know how to make it happen. Through my own naturalist training I had met a number of key people that have helped and supported me. One particular person was involved in an urban reforestation project in the city I live in. The organization had been run out of her home but was getting too big. She needed more space and the area she was considering was in very close proximity to where I had actually done much of my outdoor nature training. There were a number of buildings that were not being used and she wanted to rent one. But she didn't require the whole space so was looking to share with another organization.

I am now the executive director of Sitting Tree School. It is an alternative school based on a foundation of nature and the arts. I have a staff of 5 and we teach grades kindergarten to six. Currently it is a non-profit organization but I would like to get a charitable designation. My passions have always been children and the outdoors; I just didn't realize it before. The neurosurgeon was right. I was meant for bigger and better things. It literally took a hit to the head to realize it though. I feel that I am now doing what I was meant to do. I needed to get relocated. I really do have a job to do and something to contribute. I needed to do something useful and to be in the picture. I think everyone does.

Readers to reflect on

- If it took at least 12 or more years of education before you started working then be prepared and accept that to transition to a different career may take at least half that time. If you accept that from the start it is much easier. In the grand scheme of life it is not a lot of time.
- Consider that exploring nature involves all of the senses plus it forces you to engage physically (strength, balance, co-ordination) and cognitively (problem solving, memory, attention, planning).
- For every experience you encounter ask, “what is this teaching me?”
- When something disrupts your plan in life don't settle for second choice. Come up with a new first choice plan. Don't feel stuck with something because of limitations.