WHEN GOD CALLS YOU TO SOMETHING NEW

Retirement, Change, and Life’s Unexpected Curve Ball

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A Lawyer’s Exit Strategy by Brent Amato
A Curve Ball Or A Perfect Pitch? by Tim Klenk
How Much Is Enough? by Michael Wang
I was vocationally conflicted. My simple vocational resume just touched the surface:

“Brent practiced transactional law in the Chicago area for forty years, specializing in corporate business and non-profit work. That practice was split about equally between private practice as a partner at two law firms and in-house corporate practice for two publicly-traded companies, first as an Associate Counsel and then as General Counsel. As of December 31, 2014, he retired from the practice of law. During those years and since, Brent has sought to integrate his Christian faith and his law practice through the following: (1) Christian Legal Society, first as a board member and President and now as a staff member working with lawyers and law students; (2) Peacemaker Ministries and Crossroads Resolution Group as a Certified Christian Conciliator for conflict resolution and mentor and teacher; (3) two legal aid ministries whose missions are to meet the legal and spiritual needs of the poor; and (4) Judson University as a Business Law Adjunct Professor.”

On one hand, upon graduation from law school, I felt I was clearly called by God to the practice of law. On the other hand, for a very long time, I felt I was called to leave the practice of law to engage in full-time vocational ministry.

“Exit Strategy.” Who in the workplace has not heard of the term? I wonder, however, how many attorneys have seriously considered the concept, much less have one? After many years of wrestling with the concept, I executed one. The pilgrimage and decision involved considering what criteria should not and should be part of a Christian lawyer’s exit strategy and the promise, purpose, prerequisites, players, and planning involved in this great vocational adventure.

I. Criteria For The Consideration Of An Exit Strategy

Let’s start with a variety of circumstances that might start the thought process. Perhaps you are an attorney who is “seasoned” or “over-seasoned” and feels it is time to close a practice and move on. Or maybe you are a younger attorney who has lost his passion for a job and wants a change of scenery or to withdraw completely from the practice. Or you could be someone who has experienced a firm implode, a corporation become subject to a “downsizing” or “hostile takeover,” or the loss of a sole partner. Even more intriguing, perhaps you are an attorney who has experienced an unexpectant “close encounter of the spiritual kind.” In some manner, God has unsettled your “nest.” Like Moses, perhaps a “burning bush” in the wilderness (Genesis 3), or like Saul of Tarsus, perhaps a “blinding light” on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-16).

What should not necessarily be the driving force for an exit strategy? Let’s start with nothing short of death. My first boss, a fantastic lawyer, died in his 80s still practicing! Short of death, how about a certain age? By default, just accept a conventional normal or early retirement age. How about your circumstances in your practice – your working conditions or boss? Achieved all your goals? Other compelling circumstances? But then, Paul didn’t have much to say for his lofty achieved goals (Philippians 3:4-8) or for circumstances as a driving force (Philippians 4:11-12).

What then, should be the driving force for an exit strategy? Once again turning to Paul, we read “…I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus …. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12, 14). Simply put, nothing less than the call of God.

II. Principles For An Exit Strategy

God’s Word presents principles to guide and encourage one considering an exit strategy.

What is God’s promise to you? “For I know the plans that I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come to me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for me with all your heart.
And I will be found by you’, declares the Lord…” (Jeremiah 29:11-14a).

What is God’s purpose for you? You were “created for good works” (Ephesians 2:10). You are “exiting” but not “retiring.” Consider Abraham (Genesis 12:1-4, 17:1-14) and Caleb (Joshua 14:6-15). They had “paid their dues” and could have just “retired.” But they didn’t, and why would anyone ever want to disengage from the meaningful things of life and miss leaving a God-directed legacy? Aren’t we all called to do all to the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31)?

While each person brings a unique set of factors to the exit strategy arena, what might be some prerequisites that might help you prepare for such a move?

- First, acknowledging and accepting that life is a series of seasons and that change is inevitable and appointed by God (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, 11a). But take heart, I once heard someone say, “Change dislodges people from very comfortable places to far better places.”
- Diligence; it’s never too early to start (II Peter 1:2-10)
- Adopting a “Christian Trinitarian” strategy
  - Submitting to God, the Father (Proverbs 16:9)
  - Fixing your eyes on Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-2a) and following Him (John 21:7-22)
  - Being filled with (controlled by) the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:15-18)
- Shedding
  - Idols and the “jealous mistress” (I John 5:21)
- Recapturing your “first love” (Revelation 2:2-5, 7a)
- Seeking things above (Colossians 3:1-2)
- Pressing forward (Philippians 3:12-14)

Who could be some of the players in your exit strategy?

- Your spouse, hopefully a partner and friend through life, who is committed to you and your vocation
- Adult (mature, if not Christian) children (I Timothy 4:12)
- Wise counselors (Proverbs 11:14, 13:20): a “Paul” (someone more spiritually mature than you), a “Barnabas” (someone you have done life with), a “Silas” (someone you have done ministry with), and a “Timothy” (someone you can equip/mentor; if possible, a child or grandchild)
- Prayer warriors (Ephesians 6:18-20)

In my case, I was blessed to have all of these players play a role in my exit strategy!

III. Planning For The Exit Strategy

Imagine having made the decision for an exit strategy. Do you have a plan for moving from the decision to the execution? Again, everyone’s situation is unique, but there are some concepts that apply to all in this transition. You definitely want to be on your “A Game:”

- Pray without ceasing (I Thessalonians 5:17)
- Know yourself (Romans 12:3). Take or retake diagnostic personal assessments to pinpoint personality, strengths, weaknesses, spiritual gifts and what you are truly passionate about.
- Read, read, read (II Timothy 4:13) spiritual, vocational, educational, interesting, intriguing or “Bucket List” books
- Get your “affairs” in order (I Corinthians 14:40). First and foremost, address your relationships that need reconciliation (Matthew 5:9, 23-24, Romans 12:18). Then, attend to your health, as well as legal and financial issues, including estate planning, debt reduction, budgeting, social security, insurance/Medicare, and educational funding.
- Become your own marketing agent, whether it be just networking, a website, or more
- Determine the “non-negotiables” in your life (Ephesians 5:15-16) whether they be devotional life, corporate worship, family time, periodic scheduled events or activities, ministry, exercise, and recreation
- If applicable, implement necessary succession management at your existing job
- Leave well (II Timothy 4:7, 2:2); “wean” is always better than “cold turkey.” Make sure you a leave a legacy and hopefully a God-glorying one.
- Take a “Sabbatical” before you reengage
- Expect unexpected blessings (Ephesians 3:20-21)

IV. A Case Study: Andrew Luck

He was a professional football quarterback with the Indianapolis Colts, the No. 1 NFL draft pick, an all-star and leader of his team. Then, as a result of a series of serious injuries, at age 29, just weeks before the start of the regular season, he retired. Some observations about Luck that are instructive:
• “He never needed to force football into a conversation or activity and was happy to spend time with anyone or anything he found stimulating. That, or use his elevated platform to share his passions with others.” (Connor Orr, Sports Illustrated, September 9, 2019)

• “The sport wouldn’t define him. Many admired him and it had nothing to do with sports. He was a man who genuinely loves to try anything, which is what makes him capable of doing anything.” (Connor Orr, Sports Illustrated, September 9, 2019)

• “He has the wisdom of knowing we have to follow our hearts in this life, and that we ultimately owe it to ourselves to keep on moving down the path to chase new dreams, no matter what the rest of the world thinks. This is our one and only shot at life, and we need to go all in.” (Nathaniel Nakadate, Luck’s professor at Stanford)

• “His football career is over, which means, for now, people are speaking about Luck in terms of an ending. But his retirement is also about what he was doing all along, and about the many things outside of throwing a football that ultimately matter. Football is over, but as John Green [author] says, ‘With Andrew, I wouldn’t put anything in the past tense.’” (Connor Orr, Sports Illustrated, September 9, 2019)

V. Counterpoint

Okay, I know what some of you are thinking: “I am clearly called to my practice of law; I love it; and God is blessing it. No need for any exit strategy.”

My first “word” to you: praise God, rejoice, give thanks, and stay the course with all that you have to give! My second “word” to you: be cautiously content! Moses, as a shepherd in the wilderness, didn’t wake up one day, realizing he was going to see a “burning bush which spoke” to call him to a new, radically different vocation. He thought it would be another day with sheep, but God had other plans for him. Paul, a religious zealot on the road to Damascus, didn’t wake up one day, realizing that he was going to encounter a “blinding light” to call him to a new, radically different vocation. He thought it would be another day of persecuting Christians, but God had other plans for him.
I tell lawyers of all ages that it is never too early to start considering their “exit strategy.”

Most of the young ones look at me as if I’m crazy. Many of the older attorneys look at me as if I have a concept that is worthy of their attention but never considered. How about a modest first step for all? Make sure you are engaged in something that is pleasing to God, enriching for you, and has nothing to do with your practice of law. At least you won’t have to agonize over reinventing yourself when the exit strategy becomes a reality.

“There is an appointed time for everything…God has made everything appropriate in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:1a, 11a).