

Happy Groundhog Day

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After 18 years in the public affairs department of a large pharmaceutical company, on an otherwise ordinary April afternoon I let myself out the side door of Corporate America. Then I drove around to the front door, went to the security office and relinquished a badge that no longer had anything to do with my identity.

“I’ve heard of you,” the woman behind the desk said, as if I were somebody. I would have preferred not to be recognized. I wanted this final transaction to be anonymous. I was leaving by choice and with a sense of great relief. On the inside, I was happier than I’d been in years. But on the outside, my emotions had been spilling over all day, quite unexpectedly.

A routine trip through the breakfast line had set me off for the first time. Two long-time cafeteria employees had greeted me. I wanted to say goodbye, but couldn’t find my voice.

Then came phone messages from Denise and Alan. Denise was one of the first friends I’d made at the company. We’d stayed in touch after she changed jobs and moved to another city.

I had worked for Alan most of the time I’d been there. He’d retired the year before, inadvertently setting off the chain of events that was allowing me to escape. As I listened to those final voice-mail messages of my tenure in the corporate world, I teared up again.

I pulled myself together, and two doors down I found my friend Karen. She stepped out from behind her desk to hug me.

“I’m really happy, you know,” I managed to squeak out. “But I just got this message from Alan, and one from Denise. I had no idea this would be such an emotional day.”

“I’m so happy for you,” Karen said. But now she was getting teary, too.

We’d been through a lot together. We were both dissatisfied with what the company—and our department—had become. In recent months we’d reminisced about people we’d known, projects we’d worked on, challenges and triumphs, memorable road trips. We’d also reminded each other that the good old days hadn’t always been so great. But we knew we’d been part of some important milestones in medicine, in the growth of a small company into a global leader, and in carving out new roles for women in an industry that had long been an old boys’ club.

“I just have to get through these next few hours,” I said, smiling at the thought. “Then I can go home and finish packing. I’m off to Paris tomorrow to celebrate my great escape.”

“Oh, Paree,” Karen cooed. “That will make you feel better. Anyway, there’s nothing here to be sad about. Anything that was worth crying over ended a long time ago.”

I knew she was right. We hugged each other again and I made my way to the ladies room, determined to put my face back together and keep my tears in check.

I appreciated the good wishes from my friends, but they reinforced a feeling I'd had many times in recent months: most of the people who were familiar with the best work I'd done there were long gone. With few exceptions, those left to bid me good-bye didn't know me well—in part because the company had become so bloated and in part because I'd done my best to fade into the wallpaper. I'd always vowed to leave before I landed on the receiving end of one of those horrible tribute/roast retirement parties. But now that my final day had arrived, it seemed a little pathetic that the closest I would come to an official send-off were two missed phone calls.

I had time to kill until my final appointment with Human Resources. So, for my penultimate act as an employee, I headed to the onsite salon. A manicure relaxed me, and I was amused by the steady stream of people walking in for hair appointments and spa treatments on company time.

While the technician buffed, I remembered a day not long after I joined the company when I discovered, quite by accident, a barber shop in the basement where busy men (and only busy men) could get their hair trimmed without leaving the building. Now, the dramatically expanded campus offered so many amenities to its thousands of occupants that there was almost no need to go anywhere else for anything else, ever. I understood the on-campus amenities were intended to help with work-life balance. But sometimes it seemed the balance had tipped a little too far, with work being almost an afterthought. Not that I was in a position to judge anyone else's ratio of work to life: after all, soon I would be stepping into unknown territory, my time unstructured and no work to balance with anything else, at least in the short term.

But first I had to let the fresh paint on my fingernails dry, and then I had to keep my last appointment in Human Resources.

Everyone who had been displaced in the Public Affairs reorganization was checking out on the same day, so the HR liaison for the department, Daisy, had a full schedule. The closer it got to my 11:30 appointment, the more confused my emotions became. Signing the final papers—which among other things released the company from legal action regarding my unemployment—was a mere formality, one I'd been itching to execute for more than eight weeks. The waiting period had been designed to assure that any second thoughts were resolved, and to provide a job-search cushion.

I hadn't had so much as the shadow of a doubt since Groundhog Day. As far as I knew, I was the only person leaving of her own free will, invoking a technicality HR most likely had not expected anyone to use. As I pushed the button for the elevator, my stomach started doing little flips. Still, I practically skipped into Daisy's office, knowing the end was in sight.

But by the time she had closed the door behind me, tears were streaming down my face, uncontrollably. Daisy had only been with the company for a few months, and we didn't know each other. I'd met with her briefly when I'd turned in the initial paperwork that confirmed my intention to accept a voluntary separation package. She had no sense of my history there, no knowledge of all I'd been through, no reason to believe me as I sputtered into the tissues she handed me, "Really, I'm not sad about leaving. It's just an emotional day."

The next ten minutes were a blur. Every time I signed a document and handed it back to Daisy, she passed me a new one, along with another tissue. I was furious with myself for falling apart. In my mind, I had imagined this as a very cool scene, with me being all blasé and Daisy being taken aback by my nonchalance at walking away from a job offer with no new work lined up. In the moment, I blubbered, I dabbed at mascara streaks, I'm sure I left tear stains on some of the papers that secured more than a full year of salary and six months of health care coverage.

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I'd long since stopped counting the number of times the public affairs department had been re-configured, re-engineered, realigned, deconstructed, reconstructed, renamed or otherwise reinvented since I joined the company in 1987. I'd weathered every storm, moved from one role to the next, been promoted again and again, navigated my way through a de-merger and then a merger. I'd succeeded almost in spite of myself: I'd never been all that ambitious about climbing the corporate ladder or getting a new title. Still, I'd worked my way up from public relations project manager to manager of employee communications to director of community relations.

By the end, even though I'd grown weary of the corporate world and knew I had to escape, I still felt good about the work I was doing in community relations. I was in a field—corporate social responsibility—that was being taken more seriously than in the past. I spent at least as much time working with people outside the company as inside, which made me feel that in some ways I *had* managed to escape, even though I was still there.

As long as they let me keep doing this job, I told myself time and again, I'll stay. Once they ask me to move on to something else, I'm gone.

There was no good reason to think I wouldn't be allowed to keep doing that job. Even other public affairs colleagues looked at community relations as being almost beside the point, which was precisely where I wanted to be at that stage in my corporate career.

So late in 2004, when rumors of the latest public affairs "reorg" began to circulate, I assumed it wouldn't have any lasting effect on me. I imagined this exercise would be pretty much the same as all the others: Shave away a little dead wood. Give out some new titles. Shake up the chess pieces and rearrange them on the board, more or less in the same configuration they'd had two reorganizations ago. Explain that we had to realign to better serve external and internal cus-

tomers, to create new synergies, to enhance competitiveness, to focus on core competencies, to be sure the right people were in the right jobs at the right time.

Soon, though, it became apparent that this time there would be significant casualties. One autumn afternoon I found myself sitting in an overcrowded, windowless conference room as a senior manager laid out the objectives and timeline for the reorganization. A dozen or so of us were seated around the long table and another ring of chairs was wedged between us and the walls. A few people stood in the corners. The close quarters added to a sense of unease. Some of us did our best to look nonchalant, while others clearly were nervous.

A few slides into her PowerPoint presentation, the manager unveiled terms of separation packages that would be offered to employees who did not find jobs in the soon-to-be streamlined department. Suddenly, the overcrowded room seemed perfect, all that was missing was the music. The rules were being explained for the benefit of those who had not played before, and the fact that separation packages had already been defined made it clear there would not be enough seats for everyone when the music stopped.

To a casual observer, it may have looked like I had zoned out and was doodling on my notepad; in fact I was doing the math, multiplying my years of service and my salary by the formula on the slide.

Think of all the time I could buy myself with that kind of a cushion. Time to rethink my goals. Time to make a thoughtful transition to another kind of work, another kind of an organization—a transition I've been promising myself for years.

I looked around the room, wondering who was most likely to go away. Unfortunately, it wasn't me. I've never been the kind of employee a manager would opt to get rid of; I work hard, I'm reliable, steady and eager to please. Really. I had a quarter-century's worth of stellar performance reviews to back me up on this.

So when the first drafts of the new org charts were circulated in November, I mentally penciled my name into two boxes where I thought I might land, both in community relations. Still, I found myself lusting after a separation package, fantasizing about being made redundant. Every job description had been rewritten—if only slightly—so everyone (except the top managers) had to apply for one or more positions and be interviewed as if we were new hires. Many of us were interviewed for two positions at once. This made it impossible to present oneself as preferring either; in my case, it made it easier to be noncommittal.

By December, I had a glimmer of hope. The first round of appointments had been made, and my name had not yet appeared in a box.

On one level, I was insulted—I was more than qualified for both of the positions I'd been interviewed for. I began to wonder if maybe I *had* become the kind of employee a manager wouldn't

mind letting go; perhaps my dissatisfaction with myself in that world had become too transparent.

On a deeper level, I rejoiced, holding onto the magic PowerPoint formula and the freedom I could almost taste. For once I was paying close attention to the numbers. I knew all the remaining boxes were below—if only slightly—the box I currently occupied. And anything less than a lateral move included the option to take a package.

There was something perverse about wishing so fervently *not* to have a job when the music stopped, surrounded as I was by people who were desperate to stay. But there was also something perverse about the way this reorg was being handled, the murmurings seeping out from beneath constantly closed doors, little clues that implied the process was less about putting the right people in the right jobs, more about cutting costs.

It seemed too good to be true: my years of procrastination and inertia were being rewarded. The exit sign was beckoning. I was nowhere near ready or able to retire at 46, but I could see myself taking a few months off, for the one and only time in my adult life. There were, in 2005, plenty of good jobs still to be had. I had no outstanding debt, except for my mortgage, so the short-term financial risk was minimal. The larger risk—the one I was finally embracing—was the emotional one: trying to figure out who I was away from that company, without that ID badge, with no one else left to blame for my work-related unhappiness but me.

As we waited for the next round of interviews, a sort of gallows humor set in. When a co-worker (or was it me?) found a headline on the Internet that seemed to describe the reorg process, it quickly spread through the ranks: “Massive manure fire burns into third month.” Other departments were being streamlined, too. The intranet announced, “Intelligence Affairs function moves to Knowledge Services,” but no matter how many times I read the article below that headline, I could not decipher its meaning.

In January, Luanne—a previous manager who’d become a friend—invited me to interview for a role on her new team. The job was an important one—managing communications for the 6,000-person US sales force; it was also a 24/7 commitment, jumping through endless legal and regulatory hoops and working in the hierarchy-happy sales organization.

I knew I no longer had the stomach for that kind of work. It didn’t matter that Luanne was one of the best managers I’d had, or that I liked and respected the vice president of sales, Michael. When Luanne called, I tried to hint at the fact that I didn’t want the job.

“Are you telling me you wouldn’t accept this job if it was offered?” she asked, a bit testily.

“I don’t know what I’m telling you,” I replied a bit angrily. “Because I’m not sure what I can or can’t say, even to you.”

She said I had to be interviewed by Michael, since I couldn't turn down a position that hadn't yet been offered—another rule in the game. So I suffered through the one and only honest conversation I had with anyone in the company during the official proceedings surrounding the reorganization.

Well, Michael was honest anyway.

“Now, Eileen,” he said, maintaining steady eye contact as any good salesman would, “We all know what you've done here in the past. I know you've got the skills to handle this position, you're a terrific writer and you understand all the regulatory challenges around what we do. Luanne is very comfortable working with you and recommending you for this role.”

Michael was smart and funny and had a leadership style that set him apart from anyone else I knew in that world. Despite my resolve, I couldn't help but think it would be fun and challenging to work with him.

But Michael wasn't convinced I wanted this job.

“I could be mistaken,” he went on, “but it seems to me that since the merger you've almost become invisible. You don't seem to have the same commitment or enthusiasm you had in the past.”

I couldn't deny this; more than once we'd both been in on conversations with other people about the “new” company, conversations that had involved a lot of eye rolling. Now I was being asked to defend myself against charges we both knew were true.

“Well, I think we can agree it's been difficult to adjust to the changes around here.”

“Yes, but it's been more than five years since the merger.” *Fair point*, I thought.

“We haven't worked together much during that time, and you haven't seen me in action lately,” I replied. “I've been a good ambassador for the company in the community. I worked on communications around the headquarters expansion. I helped shape our corporate philanthropy programs, including company giving policies and employee volunteer programs. I've worked hard to help the company develop a solid reputation as a good corporate citizen.”

“I don't doubt you've done a good job. But the sales force is the heart of the company. If you're going to work with me, you've got to believe in the company and especially in the sales team. I need to know you will share my belief that we've got the best sales force in the industry. We want them to know they've got the support of the entire organization, and that means giving a 110% effort.”

I was impressed with Michael's directness, and I wished I could have returned it in kind and thanked him for calling my bluff. *Sorry, Michael, I'm not your girl*, I wanted to say. But the package, my package, hung in the balance. I couldn't blow the interview by telling him the truth. And I didn't want to embarrass Luanne. I had to make an effort.

"I've been working closely with the regional offices for nearly two years now to develop their local community relations efforts," I reminded him. "If you ask around, I think you'll find I've been a good partner to the sales organization. I've been out in the field, I've volunteered side by side with local teams, I'm on the phone with managers and reps every day."

It wasn't an answer to his question, but it was all I had.

It went on like that for a few more painful minutes. I fumbled, I fudged. Michael either felt satisfied he'd made his point and wouldn't have to have this conversation with me later if I took the job, or else he simply let me off the hook.

I wouldn't have hired me based on how I handled myself that day. Then again, if it had been up to me, I wouldn't have wasted Michael's time or mine going through the motions of interviewing for a job I had no intention of accepting. I would have offered me a package back in November, and saved a lot of aggravation all the way around.

When the word came down that those of us who had played through the second round of interviews would learn our fates on February 2, someone (okay, it was me) quickly spread the word that the date had been selected so management could repeat the process over and over until they got it right, just like in the movie *Groundhog Day*.

So late on that early February afternoon, I found myself in a small, sterile conference room, across the table from Luanne. Sun streamed through the windows and reflected off the generic artwork.

"So," she began, "no point keeping you in suspense. I'm glad to offer you the associate director job. Michael likes you, and we know you've got the experience to do this job well. We haven't yet identified the director of employee communications, and you'll be reporting to that person, who will report to me. And of course you'll have a dotted-line relationship to Michael."

I wanted to stop her, wanted to spare us both the details, but she had her spiel prepared and didn't give me an opening. She slipped a sheet of paper out of a leather portfolio and slid it across the table. The page included the new title, salary and other terms of compensation.

"I know this is an associate director position, and you've been a director." *Uh-oh, here it comes*, I thought. *She's done something to work around the system, and I'm going to be stuck*. But she hadn't, and I wasn't.

“We’ll keep your salary at the same level,” Luanne continued, “and you really shouldn’t think of this as demotion. It’s just that this department is larger and has a different structure.”

Up to this point the conversation had gone pretty much as I’d expected. But Luanne closed with a comment I hadn’t anticipated: “I want you to know, this is not in any way based on pity. You are totally qualified for this position, and I didn’t do anything special to make this happen after you weren’t selected for one of the community relations jobs.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, trying to process that statement, wondering if I had, in fact, become someone Luanne or anyone else might have found worthy of pity. I certainly didn’t see myself that way, least of all in this, my singular moment of triumph.

I knew I didn’t want and wouldn’t accept the job. But I didn’t realize until I saw that piece of paper on the table how grateful I was for the offer. That concrete, written offer allowed me to own the decision, to claim my future, instead of being sent away.

“Thanks,” I said again, finding my voice while Luanne waited for the response she was sure would follow. “But I’m going to turn down the offer,” I said, more steadily than I thought I might. “I want the package. I have to get out of here.”

Luanne hadn’t mentioned a package, but I knew I had the right to ask for it, according to the rules of the game. It took her a moment to absorb what I’d said. To her credit, she didn’t try to change my mind. She asked all the right questions—as a manager and as a friend—to be sure I’d thought through the implications of my decision, including the effects on my pension of leaving before both my 20th anniversary and my 50th birthday. But I’d had months—years, in fact—to contemplate this moment, and I knew without a doubt the decision I’d just announced was the only one I could possibly have made.

Luanne slid the written offer back to her side of the table and tucked it into her folder. She said she would notify Human Resources, then she excused herself so she could let Michael know they needed to find someone else.

And just like that—well, that and the next two months of becoming a little more redundant each day—I went from being part of a well-regarded global organization with tens of thousands of employees to being a one-woman band. It seemed fitting that my mid-life experiment officially began on Groundhog Day, when I said “no” to a future shadow of myself I recognized only too well and “yes” to one I couldn’t yet begin to perceive.

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