

Creativity and Intrinsic Motivation

By Tish Vincent

Creativity

It's very dark at 5:30 a.m. in late October in mid-Michigan—night, really. The light fixture above the dining room table casts a lovely, warm light on piles of green and dark blue fleece, silver knit fabric, fuchsia satin, tulle, and the sewing paraphernalia strewn about. Fortified by several cups of coffee, I am hard at work sewing green ninja, fairy princess, and Cookie Monster costumes for my grandchildren. Friends wonder how I find the time to sew when I'm so busy. I, too, wonder, but I know from past experience that something about the process of creating Halloween costumes is uplifting.

Stopping my work at a designated time and shifting into preparations for the work day, the worries and concerns that ordinarily float in the back of my mind are replaced with entirely different considerations. Should I make the silver vest jagged or smooth at the edge? Should I glue Cookie Monster's eyes or tape them on so the cap can be washed? Should I add three layers of tulle for the fairy skirt or two?

Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is defined by Carol Bainbridge as "motivation that comes from inside an individual rather than from any external or outside rewards, such as money or grades."¹ For me, sewing costumes is intrinsic motivation. I'm able to transform an idea in my mind into a costume for my grandchild. In 2010, I sewed a green and teal dinosaur with gold sequined spikes and a lustrous sheep costume with pink satin lining for the ears. Unfortunately, norovirus prevented the two grandchildren who were to wear these costumes from trick-or-treating. The creations still hang in my closet, unworn, but my pleasure in creating them did

not diminish. I don't sew to produce a certain outcome. Sewing just makes me happy.

A 2004 study of the prevalence of various mental health or substance abuse diagnoses in lawyers revealed that law students move away from intrinsic motivators and toward extrinsic motivators² in their first year of law school and continue in that direction as they start their careers. Something about our system of legal education negatively affects our subjective sense of well-being, and many people are studying this in an attempt to understand it. I believe everyone in the legal field—whether student, attorney, or judge—must develop an awareness of this phenomenon and deal with it in his or her own life. Stand up and say no to this effect. Don't let it change you. Risk happiness, find your intrinsic motivators, and engage in them every day of your life.

Clean Slate

January is the month of new beginnings. Even if you have decided that New Year's resolutions are pointless and you usually forget them by the end of the month, most people think about their choices and decide to make some changes at the beginning of the year. In 2013, consider discovering what intrinsically motivates you and try to schedule more of it each day.

How do you know what intrinsically motivates you? Can you remember which activities made you happy when you were eight years old? Can you remember what

you enjoyed in college before you entered law school? Is there anything you do that causes time to fly by unnoticed? Have you ever had the experience of starting a project at lunch time and realizing it's 7:30 p.m. even though it feels like 15 minutes went by?

If you have no idea about your intrinsic motivators, let me offer a list of categories: hobbies, exercise, community involvement, friendships, pets, children, and volunteering. This is not an exhaustive list, but a starter. We are, of course, excluding all activities of a legal nature—no studying contracts, writing briefs, memorizing rules, or researching cases.

If you don't know your intrinsic motivators, you'll have to explore the possibilities by trying different things. When people are in recovery from an addiction, they don't really know what they enjoy because they're in the habit of turning to a substance for enjoyment. In structured treatment programs for substance abuse disorders, part of programming consists of group work with activity therapists, who take the patients bowling and to the park. They lead workout sessions, play hacky sack and cards, dance, and paint things. The purpose is to allow patients who are new to recovery to begin to recognize the activities that make them laugh, soothe them, and boost their mood.

Time Famine

Time famine is a phrase that comes up in literature about attorney wellness. In

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my work as a therapist, I sometimes treat graduate students who cannot finish writing their dissertations. They seek therapy trying to understand the cause of their mental block. Typically, they have done their research, have their references, and plan to start writing. But they do everything else but write. I ask them for a slot of two to four hours in the morning when they can commit to working on their dissertation. Then I tell them they can *only* work on their dissertation for that period and then must stop. They look at me with dismay, thinking, “I am paying for this?”

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The following week they come back and say, “The funniest thing happened. I bought the timer like you said. I set it for three hours and when it rang, I stopped writing. I didn’t want to stop. I could not stop thinking about it, and the next day I was at my desk at 8 a.m. ready to write. I have gotten more done this week than in the last six months. Should I keep that commitment to only write three hours?”

“Yes,” I answer. “Keep that commitment until you’re finished.”

The injunction to stop writing causes them to keep working on it in their heads. It is a paradoxical intervention and a bit tricky, but it works. My clinical experience leads me to believe that law students, attorneys, and judges live a reciprocal version of the dissertation writer’s life. They research, write, talk to people, and advocate all the time. They sit at their desks surrounded by papers, weighing what to do next, and there is never enough time to do it all. They work and work and work like the proverbial hamster in the exercise wheel.

Legal professionals need an injunction to spend one hour a day with intrinsically

motivating activities. Set a timer on your mobile phone and let all thoughts of everything else go. When the timer rings, you stop. Stop swimming upstream in the river of responsibilities and float downstream in the current of your life’s interests and pleasures.

One of the primary symptoms that lead mental health professionals to consider a diagnosis of depression is loss of pleasure in previously pleasurable activities. My premise is that the study and practice of law create such a time famine for people that they move away from intrinsically motivating activities in an effort to work more. Once they move far enough away, they become depressed.

New Beginnings

Rather than load your to-do list with things you should do, consider committing one hour a day to doing something you enjoy. Set your timer and play! ■



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FOOTNOTES

1. About.com, *Intrinsic Motivation* <<http://giftedkids.about.com/od/glossary/g/intrinsic.htm>> (accessed December 17, 2012).
2. Sheldon & Krieger, *Does legal education have undermining effects on law students? Evaluating changes in motivation, values and well-being*, 22 Behav Sci L 261 (2004), available at <<http://web.missouri.edu/~sheldonk/pdfarticles/BSL04.pdf>> (accessed December 17, 2012).