

Reimagining: Life Beyond

Unemployment

By Luz

My breath stopped. Their stiff body language told me I had not misheard. At a hastily called meeting, two managers had just announced that my employment as an internal consultant would terminate in 30 days.

I work within the framework of organizational psychology – the science and art of how organizational and human systems interact. I attempt to understand system dynamics and help create sustainable change. My leaving this organization and the concurrent world economic debacle seemed to resonate, although at different levels. I encountered and ran afoul of systemic fault lines in my organization just as the world was brought to its knees for its unsustainable systemic practices.

It was late 2009. California and the rest of the world were in the midst of an economic melt-down and I sensed we had not yet hit bottom. I saw this crisis as the consequences of corporate and political activities pursued out of primary allegiance to profit, fostering wanton disregard for the needs of most people. A growing movement to embrace a triple bottom line – people, planet, and prosperity – excites me, but also gives me concern for our collective challenges ahead.

Sheltered from unemployment for nine months, I was now being cut loose from a good paycheck. But more painful had been the accumulation of betrayals by a few people with whom I worked in what had promised to be my dream

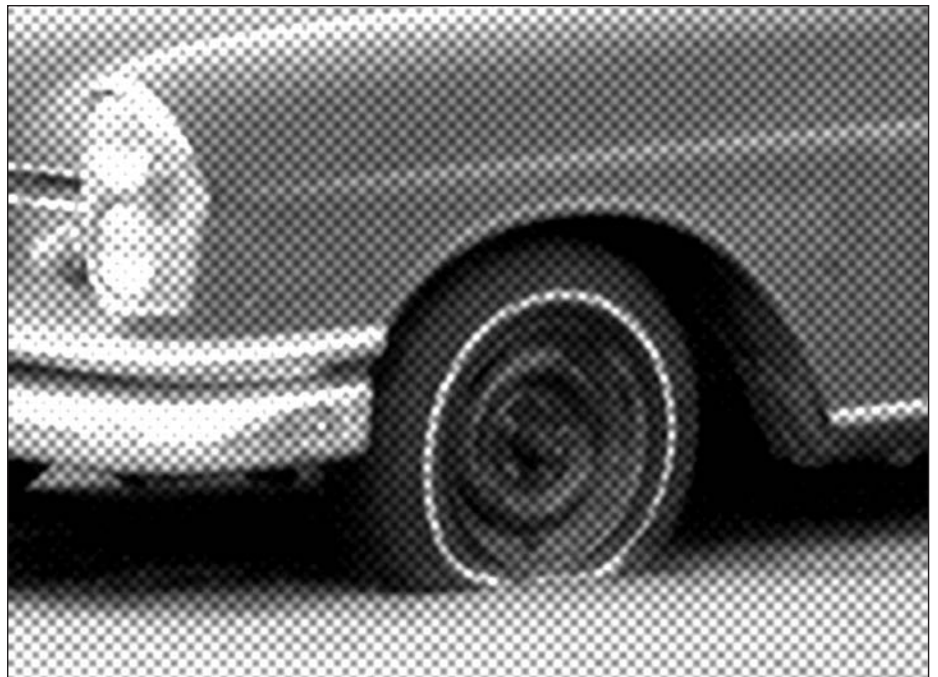
job. Two authentic interviews, great recruiter feedback, and two quick job offers led me to believe that everyone wanted all of what I offered. Even with further research, I unknowingly – and mistakenly – chose the most political, individualistic, and elitist of the two employers.

Looking back on my layoff eight months later, it's frighteningly easy to imagine how I might have spun down into an angst-ridden pit filled with anger, fear, and resentment. That has sometimes been my unemployed experience. This time, when the system's negativity so nakedly revealed itself in that manager meeting, everything changed.

It was no longer about them and me; it now became about what was right for me. While still angry, I knew that dwelling on even righteous anger would keep me trapped in the past, consume and defeat me. Instead, I chose to learn from this extremely stressful experience and to refocus my energy toward what I wanted next. This instinctive inner listening softened my interpretation of the circumstances and opened the door toward a future that I resolved would be much healthier.

Sitting in that meeting, I had felt shock and yet also some emerging sense

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of completion. While a 30-day notice did not seem to qualify as a firing, I had reason to use the “f” word. Over many months I had witnessed the unhealthy dynamics of a huge system riddled with fear, distrust, and punitive scapegoating. I personally had fallen into a nasty political trap for reporting specific dysfunctional behavior that was too close to the bone for a couple of leaders. Already injurious, the situation was likely to escalate, adversely affecting the entire organization. While identifying issues was well within the scope of my role, the time-honored reactionary practice of “shoot the messenger” proved a more expedient fix. One leader dodged looking at the broader systemic conditions and my managers fell into line. Two people lied, projected their own bad feelings onto me, scapegoated me as the troublemaker, and I was almost let go three months into my role.

Whether by nature, training, or early survival skills, I perceive things in a system that others cannot see or choose not to acknowledge. When someone’s interests might be disadvantaged by the truth I reveal, their discomfort can become dangerous to me. Judged “guilty” by lies and false assumptions, I had tried to drop below the leadership radar and focus on my clients. Yet I found myself listening for the other shoe to drop. “They haven’t fired me yet,” became my rueful joke with two trusted colleagues. With the final reality of a forced exit, all the difficult feelings I had tried to suppress for months – simply to function and do the work – broke to the surface and threatened to drown me. The managers and I faced each other across a chasm.

Within the emotional churn, alongside the sense of emerging completion, another quieter feeling lurked below conscious naming. When

it finally broke clear I recognized it as intense relief. It’s over... I’m leaving. Thank Goddess! The deepest part of me that had struggled and twisted and compromised and sold part of my soul for the dream of good work and a steady paycheck now leaped in joy as it saw the door opening on its cage. Instantaneously, I was back, inhabiting my body and immediately grounded into an energy so large that nothing could injure that ferocity. Even management claims about my clients’ opinions of my work – heartbreaking as that was – could not dislodge the fresh scent of freedom and my reawakened power. I knew the truth of my client work from their frank feedback – verbal and somatic.

The next 30 days were transformational. I negotiated my needs with management and engaged their active support to help me fulfill my high expectations for completion and hand-off. For once they did not stint me. I was happier than I had felt in months and could not stop smiling. People said that I appeared more at ease and the difficult manager even remarked that she had never seen me show up so authentically. I wonder if she asked herself why. I created my own strategies for finalizing my client work, rating my teams as high as I could possibly justify, with less managerial interference. My joke morphed into, “So what are they going to do? Fire me?” The day I left, the difficult manager’s eyes welled up as she told me how impressed she’d been with my “grace and dignity” during this final period.

Two days before my exit, I set up an evening celebration with women friends at a suave bay bistro. The last thing I needed

after signing HR final paperwork would be to stumble home into unemployed status alone. Rather, I walked straight into their loving arms. I was feted and congratulated. We ate, drank, toasted, and blessed my transition into sanity and wholeness. We reminisced on our professional lives and what we still wanted to accomplish. That night stands as a testimonial to the need for closure, a casting of a sacred circle of support, a consciously created event to close one door and breathe into readiness for another to open.

I rested that entire month. I went to my paid retreat in Mexico, where the land and the people always nourish me. The Sufi dances blended with the sounds of the great ocean in my blood and limned my heart with joy. Deeply replenished, I returned home and my health crashed. I dragged myself through weeks and weeks of gloomy fatigue. I did what I had to do for unemployment benefits. I took a Reclaiming class and began to feel the inner stirrings of life beyond the muck. I chatted with colleagues about the work I thought I wanted. Another flare-up of a chronic condition threw me into physical pain and panic. My holistic practitioners shook their heads, murmuring about my extended healing crisis. Sometime during those three months of winter I

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finally understood that I was detoxing. They were right. Not only had the stress hormones crashed my immune system, but all of me had been wounded by that poisonous job in an utterly dysfunctional system. Acknowledging this truth allowed me to surrender and accept the necessity of rest.

I did what I could to do what I had to do, and left it at that. Life became simpler and easier. I accrued more debt due to the shortfall of money, but I kept myself fed, the mortgage and other bills paid. I chose to believe that this was a temporary difficulty. First I had to heal. My professional passions reignited as an inexpensive learning opportunity with the right teacher presented itself. I stepped forward and signed up. I expanded my networking efforts to find work. Another Reclaiming class perfectly aligned with my emerging needs and I signed up. My tax returns garnered a chunk of refund money. A somatic-based teleseminar helped me learn from the inside-out what types of environments I truly needed to give my best and keep my soul. An injury claim settled for more than my expenses. This intermittent influx of cash kept the bank account in a rolling cycle of black. Every iteration of “luck” reminded me that I live in a world of synchronistic possibilities, realized as our intentions and expectations are released into the universal field and returned to us as matched material-energy responses.

Money has not usually been easy for me, yet somehow I’ve always managed. I remember 13 months of homelessness, unable to work because of a medical

condition that invariably sent me to the ER whenever I made the attempt, yet I was denied Medi-Cal. I remember returning to work after an industrial injury and tasked with untenable speed-up demands that again put me at risk. Given the previous hellish experiences, I resigned, although I had no notion how to pay my bills in another few months without a job – fast. Two months later I flew out-of-state to my father’s hospital bed. Four days later my beloved dad died. His accident was his ticket out of suffering, having told loved ones that he was ready to go. It also gifted me with his accidental death insurance benefits and a small inheritance, my first taste of financial security. Most of that money is now gone, but it provided a down payment for my first home, help to finish grad school, and living expenses as I recovered from grief and completed executor duties for my dad’s estate.

And now, I’m faced with unemployment benefits ending, no work, and tapping into the last of my funds. I am optimistic. I am still transforming my relationship with money. However its effect on me is less powerful than it once was.

Recalling specific steps that led me through such challenging trials is less significant than treasuring the attitudes

that I came to embrace while living them. In the midst of the journeys, I could feel some great rhythm holding me, unfolding in its own unknowable time. I knew something immeasurably rich was happening to my life, repatterning my cells, and bringing intense human discomfort. I had only to surrender into the mystery and say yes to the immram – the heroine’s journey of destiny. To navigate the fear as my body or spirit slowly healed, I focused on sensing into what might emerge next and on shaping my life with gratitude for small daily things of beauty. I remember the precious taste on my tongue of just-grilled salmon, the flare of sunset through a car window, the gift of another house-sit a couple days before I needed it, the tender smile in someone’s kind eyes, a golden orb of moon kissing the horizon as it flies high. I was in the flow of something bigger than myself, requiring my presence.

All of that is also relevant in my current situation, if I but choose to pay attention, to listen and feel for the waves of the newly emerging rhythm. It’s a realm far beyond unemployment or lack of a paycheck or the next job or a friend or lack of a partner. It’s a sacred gate, and in some ways it doesn’t really matter how I came to the gate.

All of this experience is a gift. It’s a place of re-choosing, reimagining my life, of surrender into the path of the underworld, trusting [most hours] that a new Self will emerge above ground when it is time. And I will treasure her beyond the horizon’s dreaming.

“Luz” lives in the SF Bay area. She passionately pursues travel in Mexico, sci-fi writing and reading, gardening, home repair, deepening her significant relationships, and all good things of beauty, love, spirit, and sustainability.

