What I Learned During My Sabbatical

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A cruel drama is played out every September across the country: Children, already distraught at the end of summer vacation and the resumption of school, are handed their first bundle of homework assignments. And commonly, their beloved summer recess is used against them in the form of a “What I did [or learned] during my summer vacation” essay.

I appear to have gone through this process a sufficient number of times for it to have had a lasting effect. At the end of a months-long hiatus between jobs, I find myself feeling a need to commit at least some of my experience to writing. Work can kill ya. Or, at least, do a number on your health. These few months out of work have seen me drop 20 to 25 pounds, not to mention my blood pressure and cholesterol. I've been told by friends and family that I'm looking younger and more relaxed. True, the absence of a day-job has made it easier to adhere to my fitness regimen and get adequate sleep, but I wasn't too deficient in those departments when I was last working.

I believe there's a significant neuroendocrine factor at play. If your work routinely places you in pressured and/or frustrating situations, you've got a constant stream of stress hormones coursing through you — that's not meant to be a full-time state of affairs. If your job is a toxic environment but you stay there because it pays a little more than other, less-toxic options, you're effectively selling your well-being.

Free time is only as free as you make it. Twenty-four hours vanish incredibly quickly. Once in a while, I play a little game wherein I mentally walk through a typical day, counting out the time that gets consumed by mandatory activities (work, commuting, sleep, hygiene, etc.). During my last two jobs, a normal weekday gave me a whole two hours of discretionary time. I was very protective of those two hours, since they were all I had for things like entertainment and social interaction.

With the onset of my sabbatical, however, those two hours would suddenly be multiplied, and I envisioned all sorts of projects. Some got accomplished, others were never quite completed, and yet others didn’t even get started as other things kept displacing them. Whether you completely fill your schedule with obligations or voluntary tasks, the outcome is the same: No more free time, unless you identify something you’re willing to drop from the agenda.

Live below your means. After years of residency-level salaries with mountains of educational debt, moving up to typical Board-certified levels of income can be a heady experience. Having delayed gratification for so long, it's tempting to rush out and buy the biggest, nicest house one can afford, along with one or more high-end vehicles.

Unfortunately, the party can come to a crashing halt in the instance of major illness, loss (or resignation) of a job, etc. Consider two radiologists of equal means: One lives it up, with his mortgage, car payments, etc., accounting for 80 percent of his monthly income. The other exercises some restraint, with his expenses at the 30 percent to 40 percent level. Guess whose life won't be wrecked when Medicare, swiftly followed by all other insurers, slashes reimbursements across the board by 30 percent? Guess which one, if he decides he’s genuinely unhappy at work, has the ability to bail out of his job, even if it means taking another job at a lower salary? Or to act on a sudden, unexpected investment-opportunity?

Hopefully, I’ll retain some perspective as I end my sabbatical and reenter the workforce. If, months from now, I realize that I’ve gotten grouchy and out of shape, I have a to-do list a mile long, and I’m mortgaged to the hilt, keep an eye out for my follow-up column. Maybe I’ll entitle it “Oops, I did it again.”

Disclosures: