

The Life Coach

Francine Campone

Fight or Flight

Strategies for deciding when to pay and when to play

AT THE RISK OF SOUNDING A LITTLE "WOO-WOO", I acknowledge that sometimes I do get signals from the universe about what I should and should not be doing: nothing of earth-shattering significance but enough to prompt some reflection on how to best respond on those occasions when what I want to do and what I'm actually getting done are out of sync.

A recent Thursday provided a perfect example. In an effort to contact an out-of-state company from which I had ordered some garden materials, I made four phone calls with increasing levels of frustration. Three times, the recorded message advised that "all circuits are busy." On the fourth, the phone was answered by an electronic voice which told me how important my call was and requested that I please hold. Thirteen minutes and twenty repetitions of the message later, I was still on hold and hung up. (OK- a secondary message through all of this is the value of buying locally.) Later that same day, I was determined to resolve a problem with an electronic library account. Twenty-eight minutes and four switches later, resolution was pending the return of Jim (the tech guy) from lunch. The pièce de resistance of the day was finding that the battery on the new cell phone drained after an hour and a half of use. Had I only gone outside and looked up at the sky, I probably would have seen a message forming in the clouds: give up your phone and computer for today and do something else.

It's not only technology that works in contrary ways. People, too, work against themselves. We put unpleasant tasks on hold for much longer than thirteen minutes at a time. We switch our attention around until it alights on something reasonably close to what we really need to be doing. A client who is developing a new nonprofit organization recently told me that every time she sits down to write materials or work on the web site it feels "like swimming through jelly." Instead of putting a focus on the writing tasks, she'll find some work which involves conversation with others -which she finds more gratifying- and give this priority. The writing tasks have been at the head of her to-do list for over a month; yet

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they're continuously put on hold because something else is always cutting into line.

There's a primitive part of the human brain which, in the face of threat or danger, presents the choice of "fight or flight." The basis for making this choice when confronted by a physical threat is fairly evident. The threatened individual can size up the potential for escape, the size and strength of the adversary and so forth. Menaced by unruly, uncooperative or unpleasant tasks, it would be helpful to have some basis for making a choice whether to fight or to flee.

Is it time to fight? Sometimes slogging through is a must. The client above explored what the likely outcomes would be if she just put aside the onerous tasks and she found that the cost was too high. As the director, she spearheaded the project and all who were involved were taking their cue from her. If she stopped, the project would not move forward. So we explored an alternative question-what's the jelly? What are the elements that made these tasks feel so oppressive and tedious? In this instance, when we started to examine her people vs. data work preferences, it became evident that an unresolved conflict with a friend in the organization was weighing heavily on her mind. Data work didn't provide enough distraction from her upset and the lack of resolution was draining away her energy. It wasn't that she was pushing against writing; she was pushing against her upset over the conflict.

Sometimes the decision to take on a task need not imply taking it on with seriousness. When we assign all of our tasks equal and ponderous seriousness, it's like putting a head on top of the head we already have, which is full of ideas and judgments about the misery we're inflicting on ourselves having to do such and such. A basic principle of magic is creating the illusion that the impossible is possible and allowing some part of the self to believe that. Talismans and "magic objects" can help create an illusion of ease and lightness. A friend recently gave me the silliest writing instrument ever: a pen with a rubber stamp of a pig-tailed dancing girl topping a barrel which contains bubble water and wand and a zigzag bulb which lights up pink whenever I press the point to paper. It sits proudly as part of a pen collection that includes a silver Tiffany fountain pen and numerous other "serious" writing instruments. Whenever there's a task I really dislike (like paying bills), I use my "magic" pen. It helps keep perspective and lightens the

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burden. I encourage clients to acquire a toy box of their own which might include wizard hats, talking bears or whatever it takes to fight silly.

What about the option of flight? If the cost of deferring a task indefinitely isn't unreasonably high, the choice of flight depends on an ability to consider switching gears for a while. Assessment means asking "Am I just digging myself a tunnel here?" "If I do this tomorrow, so what?" It's sometimes useful to work up a return on investment calculation. In the course of an interminable wait on hold, for example, I might ask myself "If I were paying me to hold on the phone, what would it cost?" "How much gardening, housecleaning, writing, etc. might I have accomplished in this time?" It's easy to lose sight of the fact that we have choices about how to use our time, energy and attention. Flight from undesirable tasks is always an option if we're willing to pay the cost of deferral or nonperformance.

Sometimes life is uncooperative. We don't need to collude by pushing the river.

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