

FIND THE TIME AND HAVE THE COURAGE TO CHANGE AND TO DEVELOP A PLAN FOR THE FUTURE

Many motivational speakers often recite an life altering event or a personal circumstance or tragedy which defined their life and which motivated them to do what they do, which is to spread what they believe is an important message to others. Although I am not inclined to become a motivational speaker and travel the world to enrich people's lives with my thoughts, my own "life-altering event", I think is worth sharing and hopefully, it can be an inspiration to others to find the time and have the courage to change and to develop a plan for the future, as I did.

By anyone's standards, I enjoyed a successful law practice as both a barrister and solicitor in my hometown of Medicine Hat, Alberta, shortly after my graduation from law school in 1975. As a lawyer in a small city at that time, one did not have the luxury of specializing in a particular area of practice but rather one became a "jack of all and master of some". My litigation practice took up roughly 70 % of my time and for a significant period of time, I was in court practically everyday of the week. But it was my solicitor's practice, which I enjoyed the most.

Dealing with people's real estate needs, drafting wills and assisting in the administration of an estate and other similar life events, I found was personally very rewarding. As I often said, " I was dealing with real

people and their problems, not other lawyers and their egos”.

My wife and I and our two children, Brett and Nicole enjoyed skiing and spent many days over the years with friends and family in Whitefish, Montana and the “Big Mountain”. It became a family tradition literally for decades to spend a week over New Years skiing and relaxing at this mountain retreat, something we continue to do now but with our grandchildren.

In December 2002, our family as well as Brett’s girlfriend, Sara (now wife) travelled to Montana for our annual week long ski holiday over New Year’s. We skied together on December 30th but the weather and ski conditions were less than desirable. On December 31th, we awoke early in the morning to beautiful blue skies and I was excited to hit the “slopes”. The “kids” were not as enthusiastic as my wife (Joan) and I were about another day on the hill and despite much cajoling none of them were interested in joining us. We decided not to miss the opportunity and set off for the mountain by ourselves.

After a couple of runs in the early morning on the front side, we decided to go to the backside of the Big Mountain, where the snow conditions typically were more favorable. It was an area that we had skied many times before and one, which we were both well familiar with. For those not familiar with this ski resort, there is a chalet at the top and you can ski either the front or backside of the mountain from this starting point with a high- speed quad chair on the front and a slower quad chair on the back. There is a short slope at the beginning

and then several different runs down the backside of the hill to the bottom of the quad chair. Typically, Joan would ski to a rendezvous point 300 or 400 yards down the hill and I would join her and then we would decide which of the several intermediate runs to take. As a novice skier, she would always go first and I would follow.

On this day as I took off down the hill towards our rendezvous point, I felt sudden chest pains and pain radiating down my arms together with shortness of breath. A slope, which I would normally ski in a matter of minutes, suddenly became almost impossible to navigate. I slowly "snow plowed" down the incline to the rendezvous spot at a painstakingly slow pace but on my arrival, Joan was nowhere to be found. I found out later than she had waited for some period of time and when I did not arrive, she assumed I had gone ahead. I was beyond the point of no return, so I had no choice but to continue down one of the "blue" runs to the bottom of the hill, with hopes that I would catch up and find her at some point. It was a slow and arduous trip down the backside of the mountain with the chest pain and shortness of breath continuing unabated.

Finally, I got to the bottom and I found Joan who had been waiting for sometime, obviously concerned about my welfare and thinking that I had fallen and was injured. I explained the situation and she insisted that we contact the ski patrol and get evacuated off the mountain. I resisted as we were on an extremely remote part of the ski hill and my consuming thought was to get on the chair lift and travel back up to the warmth and comfort of the chalet. There was also a ski patrol hut

nearby, if things did not improve. This could, in retrospect, have been a critical mistake, taking a twenty minute ride on a chairlift in these dire circumstances.

On arriving at the chalet finally, I had a cup of coffee and warmed up and Joan commented that I did not look very good and that we should go to the ski patrol hut and get assistance. "Yah right", I said, "If I tell them that I am a 52 year old male male with chest pains, pain radiating down my arms and shortness of breath, I will be airlifted off the mountain!"

After a few minutes Joan commented again, "You don't look very good", to which I replied, "I don't feel very good, we should go to the ski patrol hut." On arriving at the ski patrol hut, I explained my predicament to the young ski patroller who responded quite emphatically "we are airlifting you off the mountain". (what did I tell you?) I was immediately put on a gurney and an oxygen mask put over my face. We were advised that there was only room on the helicopter for me and that Joan would have to be taken down the mountain on a ski-doo. She was able to contact our son Brett and arrangements were made for him to meet her at the bottom. It nonetheless would be a 45 minute drive from our condo to this new rendezvous point.

In the meantime, I was placed on a ski patrol sled and transported by two ski patrol members to a large open area on the hill where the medivac helicopter could land. To those familiar with Whitefish, Montana and this particular ski area, there stands somewhat prophetically,

not too far away, a large statue of Jesus Christ with "open arms". God help me!

As I laid there waiting for the rescue helicopter to arrive from the Kalispell Regional Hospital, I recall that it was a beautiful and tranquil setting with brilliant blue skies and bright sunshine and snow crystals sparkling all around me. A day most skiers would die for!

I remember distinctly saying to myself very calmly, " **If you are going to die, what a beautiful place to die but on the top of this mountain, on a beautiful day like today**".

Just then, much like out of an Schwarzenegger movie, the helicopter flew over the top of the chalet and landed in the open area. I remember saying again to myself, "Oh, maybe I still have a chance". Two paramedics jumped out and loaded me onto the awaiting copter and with a quick intravenous on route, I arrived at the hospital in less than 7 minutes. And much like a scene out of ER, I was greeted on the helipad by three nurses and two doctors and whisked into the emergency room. Feverous activity took place all around me, as I was strapped to an electrocardiogram and blood samples taken. A nurse whispered in my ear, "Don't be alarmed, we are treating you as though you are having a heart attack but we don't know if you are having a heart attack".

After a long few minutes which seemed like hours, I overheard someone say, "Oh, he is not having a heart

attack” and immediately the level of preparedness and activity changed dramatically.

I was taken for x-rays and other tests and soon after a doctor attended to advise that the x-rays and all the other tests indicated that I had developed a serious chest infection around the outer lining of the lungs which mimicked all the usual signs of a heart attack. In the week earlier, I had some extensive dental work done over the better part of the day, and the dentist afterwards had given me two prescriptions, one for an antibiotic and one for painkiller stating, “take this if you need it”. In retrospect, I had misinterpreted his instructions and should have taken at least the antibiotic.

Now you must remember that the date was December 31st -New Year’s Eve to appreciate this next part of the story. The young female doctor then stated that the treatment involved a prescription for an antibiotic. “Now”, she said, “I can give you a prescription that is for one pill a day but you can’t drink any alcohol or I can give you a prescription that is two pills per day but you can drink all the alcohol you want”. I will leave it to you to surmise which of the two options I chose.

An interesting and somewhat amusing sidebar to the story is that in the interim, Joan and Brett arrived at the hospital and immediately attended the emergency department and enquired about the “patient” that had just been airlifted off the mountain. The admitting clerk advised that I was there but that they could not go in to see him as “they are working on him!” This news hit my

son like a ton of bricks and I am told that he dropped to his knees! My wife apparently maintained her composure.

After some period of time, they were told that they could go in and see me. I was sitting somewhat upright on the hospital bed with a tube up my nose and a bare chest with the electrodes from the electrocardiogram still taped to my body. I looked up and saw my wife and son at the hospital door and I don't mind saying that tears came to my eyes and I became quite emotional and started crying.

But before they could enter the room, an older gentleman in a white coat and minister's collar preceded them into the room and came to my bedside. They looked on in obvious shock as the Pastor looked at me and enquired, "Do you believe in God?" Needless to say, both Brett and Joan thought for a moment that my condition was so serious that a minister had been called to give the last rites. Thankfully that was not the case! It turns out that he was the hospital chaplain and was making his rounds and upon hearing that I had been hospitalized and "popped" in to see how I was doing. His timing however (to say the least) could not have been worse!

I was discharged from the hospital later that day and the medication that was prescribed worked well. That New Year's Eve was a blur as I spent the evening in bed recovering from my ordeal and only got up for a moment to bring in the New Year, obviously grateful to be alive. The "kids" all left the next day and we went out to dinner

at some friend's house the following evening and I felt no worse for the wear.

Joan and I were alone for a few more days and we had an opportunity to reflect on the events that had occurred. The old adage that "life is too short" came up as a constant theme. I also reflected on the future and wondered about the anxiety and stress in my life and I asked myself this question, "What was it in my life that "kept me awake" at night?" We also thought about the future that lay ahead and about our hopes and aspirations and what our plans were for retirement?

Although I thought I enjoyed my work, the conclusion that I came to was that the "thing" that kept me awake at night and caused me the greatest stress and anxiety was my litigation practice. So after careful thought, I decided to make a change!

I returned in the New Year and called all my partners into my office and advised that based upon my recent experience, that I was no longer going to do any more courtroom work and that I was going to devote my law practice to strictly a "solicitor's" practice-I was going to deal solely with "real" people and their legal needs. I distributed my litigation files among the younger members of the firm. Admittedly, there were some files that nobody wanted and I had the courage to call these clients in and advise them that for personal reasons that they would have to get another lawyer. There were a handful of files and clients to whom I felt I had made a personal commitment and I continued to complete those files. Within 6 months to a year, I completed that work

and in the meantime, I took on no other litigation work and devoted myself strictly to the role of a solicitor. The "angst" in my life was eliminated and I enjoyed a further 10 years in the practice of law, retiring on June 30th 2012.

The second part of my story arising out of my "life-altering event" was my decision to develop a plan-a retirement plan. Another adage and one that is seen most often in the context of Board Governance and Strategic Planning is that, "**if you fail to plan, you will plan to fail**". This principle has as much relevance in life as it does in the corporate boardroom.

Within months I contacted a fee for service financial planner and worked over several months to develop and articulate a retirement plan both for my wife and myself. When asked, "When would you like to retire?" I arbitrarily and without much thought stated "62" for no other reason that it sounded like a good number. Together, the financial planner and I worked towards accomplishing that goal.

The point is that any plan need not be written in stone but should on the contrary be relevant but flexible, but plan you must! I retired from the practice of law when I was 61 and half years old and so I missed it my 6 months. Unfortunately, I have seen too many of my contemporaries and other professionals working with apparently no end in sight. As I finish this article, I will turn 67 today(18/12/1950). My wife and I have travelled the world and have enjoyed good health. We are fortunate enough to spend the winter months down south. As time

goes on and I find some quiet solitude, I think about my good fortune and count my blessings that I found the time and had the courage to change and develop a plan for the future.

My “inspirational message” is a simple one.

Find the time and have the courage to change, if change is necessary to improve the quality of your life because we all know that, “life is too short”!

Secondly, take the time to develop a plan-a retirement plan. Remember even in life, “if you fail to plan, you will plan to fail”.

On my birthday, this is my gift to you!

William J Anhorn QC ICD.D
December 18th, 2017
Medicine Hat, Alberta

