

Rogers Kirven

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The black line waited at the bottom of the page. Scribbling the name his parents gave him 42 years earlier would net him enough cash to do whatever he wanted for the rest of his life. All he had to do was sign. He could build the life of his dreams: more time with his wife and family, options for each day that didn't start with a trip to the office, no set schedule to rule him. Take the cash; buy the freedom. All he had to do was sign.

"Tomorrow is the day," Rogers Kirven said to himself, not completely sure why. He was off to celebrate with some long-time buddies who had sold their companies a few years earlier. The celebration was a bit premature, but the deal basically was done. Everything was arranged. All he had to do was sign.

The trio met at a restaurant in Washington, D.C. It had been quite some time since they had seen each other, and Kirven walked in expecting high-fives and pats on the back. Two hours later, he walked out terrified.

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The conversation bounced around from their toys to their activities, never landing on any solid foundation. The ghosts of Christmas Future stared across the table at Kirven. He saw their lips moving, but he couldn't hear their words. "There was a creeping sensation of 'Uh oh! Something has happened to my friends,'" he said. Rather than seeing robust, excited and accomplished men, he saw them wandering and wondering about what they should do in life.

As they walked out of the restaurant, Kirven turned to one of his buddies, a follower of Christ, and asked him directly, "Was this the best thing you ever did in your life?" He was giving him one more chance, hoping to hear him say, "Kirven, don't miss this; sign your deal and be happy." But his friend of 15 years shook his head in confusion and said, "I don't know. I don't know."

Kirven became a man on a mission. He devoured a book called *Halftime* (Zondervan, 1997), then called author Bob Buford and said, "I've seen the dark side." For the last two years he's become a researcher of sorts.

Through conversations and connections, he's looked into the lives of men who have "signed the deal." He wanted to find out if others had realized the American Dream, or if everyone who tried ended up in the American Nightmare: divorced, adrift and broke.

Those 39 interviews (and counting) led Kirven to some insights that he shares whenever he can with anyone who is considering selling a company, retiring early or just looking for a midlife change of direction.

Too much change can be as dangerous as too little

Change creates a vacuum. Moving from a 60- to 80-hour workweek to a posture of rest and leisure creates an enormous vortex in the center of one's being. "This amount of change can throw the strongest man into a crisis of character," Kirven said. "Going from having to work to not having to work, from a set schedule to no schedule, from no time for options to time to consider every option can lead one from success to excess in nothing flat. It can take as little as six months to turn a great balance sheet into junk. People often underestimate the unseen power of change - they set out to make a change and end up being the one changed."

You can't manage your soul like a company

If you know how to run a business you certainly can figure out how to take care of your life, right? Not necessarily. "Situational stresses in business are very different from character stresses," Kirven said. "People somehow are readily hijacked in character when they have all these options." When they use formulas that were the backbone of their rationale in managing companies, they often come up short. "This is a big mystery to them," he said. "You start trying to talk to businessmen about their souls and it's like getting them to stop and ask directions."

Kirven advocates taking time to work on the soul before committing to the sale. The parable in Luke 11 gives a stern warning: If we sweep and clean our house, but do not refill it with the things of God, we are setting ourselves up for destruction from the inside out.

The "things of God" do not automatically mean ministry. "If you try to fill the emptiness created by the change with ministry, the chaos you end up with could be worse," Kirven said. "Ministry is not more spiritual than business; it can make you just as unhappy." The key, he believes, is listening to your call and connecting with God.

Don't count on leisure for the long-term

Leisure is a break, not a lifestyle. A state of constant vacation cannot sustain anyone who has tasted purpose and calling. Downtime is critical, but it is not

a strong enough foundation for any real life. The winds of change will blow it to bits. The leisure quotient Kirven discovered is about four weeks. "Go ahead, take a month off," he said. But, "If you take a month and you're not actively planning what's next, it's a bad sign."

Through his anecdotal research, Kirven observed that it takes about six months to fully tire of golf. Nine months for the hunters and the fishermen. Boaters get a whopping year and a half before they're empty again and heading for trouble.

Kirven believes the anchor in the drift is purposeful work that still involves risk. If you loved taking risks for the pursuit of gain, you also will love taking risks to advance your character and the Kingdom of God. Stay engaged in meaningful labor that incorporates your gifts in service to others. Recognize that too much leisure can be deadly.

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The mission that began after that dinner two years ago was Kirven's attempt to "save his own skin." He didn't want to end up like the two friends who sat across the table. But now, like Ebenezer Scrooge at the point when he realizes it's Christmas morning, Kirven is bellowing out, "It's not too late, it's not too late!"

The terrified man who walked out of that restaurant is building the spiritual house he wants for the future. He is digging deep to lay the proper foundation with Christ. He is shoring up his relationships with his wife and five children. He is building doorways to connect with his peer group. But unlike the man in the Luke 11 parable, he is committed never to leave his house empty on the inside, but to make sure it's full of life and passion for the purposes of God.

As for selling his company, Kirven still hasn't signed. He hasn't given up on the idea of cashing out, but he knows the timing isn't right. "I know I still don't have it figured out," he said. "And before I ever put the ink on the paper, I'll have a strong plan that will help me avoid all the negative things I've seen."

Nicole Johnson is an actress and the author of Fresh Brewed Life (Thomas Nelson, 1999). This article originally appeared in The Life@Work Journal, November/December 1999. To learn more about The Life@Work Company, visit www.lifeatwork.com.