

**Stepping Up:
Strategies for the New Counselor**
By Dorothy Firman

from:

*Counseling with Confidence:
From Pre-Service to Professional Practice*
Edited by Nicholas Young & Christine Michael

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Stepping up: Strategies for the New Counselor

By: Dorothy Firman, Ed.D.

Coming to the field of counseling is a process of evolution based in an individual's own experience of purpose, meaning and values. It is not a field people enter to become rich or famous. It is not a field they enter for an easy way to get by. The human services are filled with people who want to help. A career choice to work so closely with other people is inevitably guided by an inner calling for deep and meaningful work. However, by the time a counselor has finished college, graduate school, internships, licensure tests and getting a job, the connection to "why" may have become lost. The "how" may exact a high toll that sets the new counselor on an early career path disconnected from that which is most important to the quality of work and well being as a helping professional. The early days in the field are the ground upon which each counselor builds a professional identity. When consciousness is brought to bear in creating a new identity (in any endeavor) that identity will likely be a closer reflection of what is deeply true for that person. A good actor is not just a skilled technician. A good parent is not one who has read all the books. A good counselor is not just one who has been well trained. One of the gifts of the profession of counseling is that it is, in fact, an invitation for the counselor to be true to his or her own values and beliefs. In fact, the invitation is even more expansive, as being a counselor really does offer the practitioner a place to be authentic, to be the person s/he is, to do work that is a fit, both at the level of skill and training and at the level of purpose, meaning and values. Counseling can, and in the right circumstances is, a path of right livelihood.

Remembering Why

As the dust settles from years of training, and even during those years, the counselor (or counselor to be) is constantly choosing. Given training in myriad

theories of psychology and styles of counseling, some will appeal more than others. How does one become a Rogerian, another a psychodynamic counselor, and others advocates of as many theories as exist, and then some? Why does one person end up specializing in work with children, another does animal-assisted therapy, a third works with the expressive arts? Straight out of graduate school, the counselor may have strong leanings and plans for continued training or the new counselor may come out well rounded, but without a strong sense of identity. In these early years of training and beginning work, it is important to ask (and begin to answer) the questions that will help define a unique and appropriate professional identity. The building of a new identity, like any building, requires a blue print of sorts.

A first consideration will wisely be a reconnection to purpose. Sometimes it is a well-known connection. It is not infrequent that a counselor can remember, back as far as childhood, the threads that moved him or her towards this field. It may be a thread traced back to one's own experience of being helped in counseling. For some, it is more casual, that natural unfolding of things such that one ends up in this place rather than another. For many, it is a second career, a conscious choice to find work that has more meaning and is a better fit. Checking in for that connection is worth doing as a beginner and often, along the way of maturation in the field.

It is an easy exercise to trace the *counseling inclination*, if you will, to the affairs of childhood. Were you the child who talked to everyone? The one who wondered about the world? The rescuer of small animals? Did you notice kids in need? Chafe at perceived unfair treatment? Were you the puzzle solver? The thinker? The one who got hurt yourself? There's no formula, of course, but it is worth taking the time to find out a bit about how you got where you are today. Think back to books you loved, heroes you had, games you played. What was the role you played in the family, in the school community, with grandparents, siblings, friends? Where, in your young life, did you experience resonance, that sense that we all have from time to time, of being meaningfully connected—to what you are doing, to the environment, to yourself, to another person?

Purpose, meaning and values define a life, not as predictable outcomes (Frankl, 1959; May, 1975; Assagioli, 2000), but as woven threads of unique ways of knowing, threads that begin young, and continue to be woven throughout life: A tapestry, that, at its best, is a deep reflection of the call of Self.

...The deeper invitations of Self are potential to every person at all times. ...this deeper direction may be assumed to be present implicitly in every moment of every day, and in every phase of life, even when we do not recognize this. Whether within our private inner life of feelings and thoughts or within our relationships with other people and the wider world, the call of Self may be discerned and answered. (Firman & Gila, 2002, p.39)

To help connect to the purpose that has moved you to become a counselor, you might just ask:

- What attracted me to counseling in the first place?
- What is the meaning it has for me?
- What is my vision for myself as a Counselor?

The answer to these questions assures a deep will alignment as the new counselor steps into a professional identity that will be both difficult and rewarding. There is nothing more crucial than staying connected to purpose. From this source derives our very will to be the best we can be. “The chief characteristic of the volitional act is the existence of a *purpose* to be achieved; the clear vision of an aim, or goal, to be reached” (Assagioli, 1973, p.138). In the early stages of training, the purpose is to gain the skills to fill up the toolkit that will be with us throughout our careers. But by the time we sit face to face with another human being, the purpose will have changed. We will be there to help, to serve, to offer support, to challenge, to care. We will also be there to have a profession, to earn a paycheck, to be a contributing member of our society. But really each purpose will be different.

As these answers connect the counselor to a sense of purpose, they will strengthen the move into an identity that is new in form, but feels like home, because in fact, the new professional identity will be a set of clothes that fits you perfectly. After all you’ve been shopping for quite awhile.

Challenges to Staying Connected

Staying connected to deeper meaning and purpose while stepping into the counselor role, into that new set of clothes, invites the counselor to know him or herself—in a profound way. Gaining those skills and training and filling that toolkit defined purpose earlier, but is now replaced by a purpose that includes being present, being there, being authentic. And yet that simple purpose, which really asks only that we know who we are, is much harder to achieve than one would wish.

In the process called growing up, most of us have been taught to forget this innate presence. The remembering of such an inner radiance is radical. Establishing contact with such aliveness will do nothing less than turn our lives inside out. (Santorelli, 1999, p. 14)

The risk is that we buy the clothes that don’t fit, whether that happens under duress in a job, in internships, in training or whether it happened long ago, in family and culture. Santorelli’s “innate presence” in childhood is clothed, early on, in what has been called a survival personality (Firman & Gila, 1997). Language and concepts that describe early wounding in the family of origin are as vast as the theories that make up the field of psychology, but it is clear, from almost any theoretical orientation, that the early years condition us, for better and for worse. Conditioning, as

defined by the American Psychological Association is “The process by which certain kinds of experience make particular actions more or less likely” (APA, p 214). The work each counselor needs to do is about peeling away any conditioning that limits the ability to be true to oneself. Conditioning that makes authenticity less likely needs to be challenged. Conditioning that makes defensiveness more likely needs to be challenged. And the list goes on. For in the conditioning of the child, everything limiting or wounding in the family, the peer group, the educational system and the culture will potentially bury some of what it really means to be me...or you.

Subpersonality theory (Brown, 2004; Firman, in Young & Michael (eds), 2007; Rowan, 1990) among others, elaborates the ways each individual splits, creating an inner world of partial selves conditioned by our environment. The ways we learn to be, the messages we get, the subpersonalities and scripts (James & Jongeward, 1976) that are created in childhood are unconsciously invited to live in our heads forever. The loudest and most limiting of these typically come from our family of origin, the place we first split, the place we first took in an internalized “critical parent” voice (James & Jongeward). This is work we will do with our clients. No one comes away from a life of conditioning with out this cast of characters, noted most frequently by the never reticent inner judge or critical parent or top dog (Passons, 1975) and the oft-wounded inner child. “Our varying models of the universe color our perception and influence our way of being. And for each of them we develop a corresponding self-image and set of body postures and gestures, feelings, behaviors, words, habits and beliefs” (Ferrucci, 1982 p. 47).

Everyone has different ways of being—some that serve, some that don’t. In many ways, the counselor sits in the same condition that the client does—part unique self, part conditioned by-product of a life. Building a new identity requires some work.

Our own unique inner saboteurs, well known to us, may rear up to throw us just when we need to step fully into this new identity. Any shifting identification is met with pulls from old ways of knowing, old defensive structures, old beliefs. Once a person has created safety in any identity, moving to a larger or different identity will create at least some threat to the system. “As human beings, we seek homeostasis. We like things to remain the same. There is an element of survivability and safety in keeping things as they are.” (Belair, 2005, pp. 15-16) Normal developmental processes are at work. A child does not become an adolescent overnight...or with ease. A student does not step into a professional identity, whatever it is, with any less difficulty.

How does one optimize that move from student to professional? Good training, skilled teachers and mentors, successful internships and getting a job all help! Many people have those things as they step into the work world. Most people have some of those things, but not all. And yet even with that, the inner voices that may have plagued the student, the intern, even the child, adolescent and adult, will still

be there to offer a challenge. These voices will become blocks to a healthy professional identity.

Blocking beliefs are the thoughts, sometimes conscious, sometimes not, that stop us before we get started. They're the mental naysayers that hinder our momentum in making changes. (Seixas, 2006, p. 41)

We come to the field with a call, a longing, a belief, a fair amount of faith and a lot of not knowing. Each positive experience helps us build an identity that is stronger and more comfortable. Each setback feeds our own voices of doubt. "Can I do this?" "Am I good enough?" "Will I hurt someone when I want to help them?" These "mental naysayers" are blocks to developing a strong and authentic professional identity, a deep sense of "I". Thus, they need to be challenged, understood and healed. And at the same time, the deeper knowing of who we are needs to be freed from the grasp of those limiting subpersonalities.

In my experience as a psychotherapist I am frequently witness to the way in which the "I" is subsumed or *usurped* by the *sub*-personalities it is its function to experience, observe, direct, and guide. This usurpation in effect disables the most basic activity of the "I" and may even serve to clarify what many consider Freud's most lasting insight: namely that those who do not analyze their self-experience are destined to *enact (repeat) what happened to them*. (Klugman, 2007, p 173)

It is a mandate to counselors to do the work that they will ask their clients to do. It is the work of self-discovery. In claiming the right and the deep need to know ourselves, in this professional identity, we must face our own limiting conditions, blocking beliefs, old messages and personal demons. In the end, what we don't want is for the inner judge and scared child to be running the show: not in our personal lives and not in our professional lives. But be sure that the pull of this dynamic is strong. Even the seasoned veteran will come away from work on a bad day, full of the voice of self-criticism. And surprise of surprises, that voice will be very much the same as it was when that now-adult counselor was a young child. And on another, not so good day, that mature individual, well trained, highly acclaimed, grey hair and all, will *feel* like a child. This is to be expected and we would set ourselves up for a fall if we thought otherwise. What will serve us throughout our career, though, is having such a strong professional identity (Kottler, 1987; 2004), anchored into the best of who we are, that it is *this* self that shows up for work, sees clients, gets supervision and monitors the shenanigans of our old, deeply embedded, still wounded subs.

The good counselor has plenty of bad days and hears old inner voices, feels young inner feelings, and visits self-doubt regularly. The danger (and it is dangerous for both counselor and client) is that these experiences are unconscious, unmonitored, taken as the whole truth, repressed or projected or otherwise included in

dysfunctional and dangerous ways: Thus the importance of creating, early on, that professional identity whose foundation is built on purpose, meaning, values, skills, unique attributes of the counselor-to-be and a deep sense of Self that is more than our conditioning.

- What are the limiting beliefs that hinder me professionally?
- What subpersonality steps in when there are challenges in the work?
- Am I still trying to be something to someone from my past?
- Who am I beyond any limiting conditioning from my life?

As you work to uncover the wounds and reclaim the essence of who you are, you will be able to build a professional identity that is truthful, authentic and unique to you. And you will become, then, an honest and available model for your clients.

Finding Self

More than half a century ago, Abraham Maslow (1968) brought the field of counseling to a new consideration of what human beings are, essentially. The work of humanistic and transpersonal psychology paved the way for seeing humans beyond conditioning. The very basics that most counselors so often take for granted, now, about those that sit facing them, are basics that tell us about ourselves, as people and as professionals. Maslow's advice about human nature bears repeating.

Among other things, he mentions that human nature, "inner nature," is either good or neutral, but not bad. And thus his advice is to bring out that inner nature and encourage it to grow. "If this essential core of the person is denied or suppressed he [sic] gets sick, sometimes in obvious ways, sometimes in subtle ways, sometimes immediately, sometimes later" (p.4). Inner nature, though, as Maslow points out, is not a strong instinct. It is "delicate and subtle and easily overcome by habit, cultural pressure, and wrong attitudes towards it." (p. 4).

Inner nature, essential core, innate presence, self, I, center are among the many phrases used to describe the *who* that each of us is, before or beyond or in spite of our conditioning. And it is our job to bring it out, nurture it and finally become it. Become our Selves.

Without trying to answer the biggest questions about these lofty ideas, it is clear enough that we can become more authentic people and professionals through our own work and through our own commitment to being true to ourselves. Another early voice in the field, Moustakis (1956), offers a broad description of this process of becoming self. "True being is self and other, individual and universal, personal and cultural. It cannot be understood by comparison, evaluation, diagnosis, or analysis." (p. 4)

What then are we looking for? In a very simple way we are always looking and listening for cues, insights, felt-senses and intuitions to guide us. In the theory of psychosynthesis (Assagioli, 2000) this is referred to as an internal unifying cen-

ter: That is the experience of self that is steady and timeless, around which we can build or refine our personalities, make choices, honor values and move in the world through deeper relationship to who we are. More simply stated we are talking about the who that I am. This sense of *I* is a balance of how we have always known ourselves, what makes each of us unique, the still calm center that we sometimes find inside and the ways we are part of a larger whole.

The self can also be defined as the only part of us which remains forever the same. It is the sameness which, once found and fully experienced, acts as an ever-present pivot point for the rest of the personality, an inner stronghold to which we can always refer in order to regain a sense of poise and self-consistency. Then we can see that self remains the same in ecstasy and despair, in peace and turmoil, in pain and pleasure, in victory and defeat. (Ferrucci, 1982 p. 61)

The fields of psychology, philosophy, and religion are full of thoughts and theories about this concept. Definitions are not, in the end, needed. People who are self-reflective will know, intrinsically, when they are operating from center, being true to themselves, and living authentically. They will know when they are not. Anchoring back into that knowing of self will stand the counselor in good stead, for the journey is not easy. It will take us through all of the feelings that humans can have. It will feed every old wound that we have. It will make us feel great and lousy. And yet, if we are not at the mercy of every passing experience, but know ourselves in that “inner stronghold” we will not be tossed about on the waves so easily.

It is assumed that counselors will be self-reflective and so this work is a given as we train in, step into and live through the field we have chosen to be in.

- * Who am I?
- * How do I know my own inner nature?
- * How will I support myself in being true to myself?

A seasoned counselor offers us a frame of reference for the asking of these questions.

Perhaps the notion of *becoming*, then, is a better road to walk; that is, instead of seeking a static, formulaic answer to the puzzle of “Who Am I?” we might view the questions as demanding more of us than that. Certainly it is closer to our experience that being a person is a *process* of some sort, regardless of how we respond to the anxiety that this process involves us in from time to time. (Klugman, 2007, pp 163-4)

And anxiety is inevitable. How we respond to it and other tumultuous experiences is the key. And how we know ourselves will give us the stance from which to encounter everything that comes our way.

No one does well as a round peg in a square hole, but unless we know a fair amount about who we are, we will truly not know where we fit. It is a worthwhile reminder for the beginning counselor that the work will unfold more seamlessly if it is work that is right for you. And you will better know what work is right for you, when you know more about who you are. A professional identity can be bought off the rack at your first job. It will look, more or less, like everyone else's who works in that agency. If you're not careful the identity you assume will look like a favorite teacher's or an old role model's, though it won't fit you nearly as well as it fitted them. You want a designer outfit. It will be made just for you. And it will fit perfectly. This new identity will just be you, dressed for work.

The Unique Counselor

Professional identity formation and development are individual maturation processes that begin during one's training for the profession, evolve during entry into the profession, and continue to develop as the practitioner identifies with the profession. These processes can be viewed as the experiences that help the practitioner wed theory with reality in the direction of greater flexibility and openness. (Brott & Kajs, para.7)

In order to move towards an identification that is a good fit, the beginning counselor will need to know a lot about him or herself. Doing some work on meaning and purpose and checking into those old, family-of-origin issues that are the bread and butter of our field begin this process in a healthy fashion. At the same time, the new counselor will want to assess personal realities.

- ✦ What's in that toolkit that I have?
- ✦ What styles, skills, strategies am I really comfortable with?
- ✦ What am I missing?
- ✦ What do I deeply believe that is important to my work?
- ✦ Where do I want to head now that I'm in the field?

Staying in touch with one's strengths and weaknesses, preferences, skills, and best practices is a lifelong task. This is a good thing and allows the new counselor to enter the field fully equipped to work with the people who come to the door. Not only training, but personality and style, have some bearing on who each of us can and should work with and how we will work. New counselors will be more ready to work with that first round of people who come into the office if they have taken stock. If I have easily available qualities of humor and compassion, then I will have solid strengths to start out with. If I am uncomfortable with certain techniques I've been taught, I will be in better shape, knowing this and taking it easy as I start out. If I have sensitivities or my own wounding, preferences or judgments, I want to know them. The more I know, the more I can choose, appropriately, how to work

with each person who comes to me. Our first clients are our rite of passage, and even now, looking back thirty years, I can remember them fondly and with appreciation for how I worked with them, as new as I was to the field. At the same time, any counselor who has been in the field is likely to look back on his or her early days with a note of wonder, asking: "How did I do that?" Of course, each helping professional will learn more, become more skilled, be more comfortable and ultimately find more and more out about the field and about his or her own uniqueness in the field, as the years progress. But one doesn't wait for yet more training, more books read, more theories understood, to step up and do the work.

...learning the art of helping is a journey. It is described as a journey with a beginning but no real endpoint. Those who embark on this course find it to be a lifelong process of discovery rather than a destination. (Young, 2001, p. v)

Walking in to that first day on the job and every one of those early days in the early years is an opportunity to anchor into the strengths and gifts that are immediately available. And first and foremost is the gift of Self. Young notes: "A client will have a relationship with you, not a set of skills." (Young, 2001, p.18). What an essential reminder this is. As you come forth into the field, you are the helper. You are not a set of theories or skills. These will be in your toolkit and they will serve you well. But also in that toolkit will be a lifetime of experience in the world, your own struggles and hard won successes and the very core of your purpose for being in the helping professions, however you may know that. And **you** will be the helper sitting in the seat opposite your client. Whoever you are, with strengths and weaknesses alike, is who will be in the chair. And that is a great start.

"Genuine helpers are non-defensive. They know their own strengths and deficits and are presumably trying to live mature, meaningful lives" (Egan, 1998, p. 50). Being in this field is part of the meaningful life you are carving out for yourself. Training, study, self-reflection and on-going work are the tools that mature people use to be good at what they do. This is what stepping up as a counselor is all about. And each counselor is unique. For this we can be grateful. As every client is unique and should be seen that way, so are we.

To honor that which is unique about you promises the ability to be genuine, to show up with skills and authenticity and to be that counselor who knows how to do this work over many years, without illusion or pretense, knowing the ups and downs and coming to work, with all of who you are.

There is not a right set of skills or theories. There is no assumption that counselors need to be a certain way. We all know the guidelines, ethical mandates, legal requirements and basic training that are the foundation of our work. Beyond those, it's just a single person, bringing whatever he or she has to offer, in service of a personal, meaningful and clear purpose to help other human beings. The authenticity

that you bring to bear on your work will make all the difference in the world...to you, to your clients, to your family and community and to the field itself. You are the counselor.

Bouncing Back

“It was difficult to embrace a professional identity that had been in place only 48 hours. I reacted with an acute bout of indigestion” (Bender & Messner, 2003, p. 9).

No matter how well we build a professional identity, it will be challenged, both in the beginning of our careers and from time to time throughout. Early on the voices of doubt will make every minor challenge into a big deal and counselors who are paying attention will notice how often they stretch too far to accommodate a client or hold boundaries too tightly in order to feel “professional” or stick too closely to the rules in order to be safe or some such unconscious strategy to help transition into this new world. That’s all fine. Having some safety mechanisms, some healthy defense structures in place is a good idea. What we want, though, is not to get stuck in rigid roles or ideas about who we should be. And in that opening to more authentic ways of being, defenses are lessened. That’s good and bad news. Truly authentic people—open, caring people—are relatively undefended. This allows deeper empathy, clearer access to intuition and the profound possibility of the I-Thou relationship. The bad news is that letting go of defensiveness creates vulnerability in ways that may leave us open to wounding. Tough choice. But the really good news is that over time and with practice, in life and in the profession, each of us can become both more “defenseless” and “safer”. True safety lies not in a good shield, but in an openness that needs no defense. And then, from this ideal model of a place we’d like to be, comes the invitation to let it be okay to make mistakes. Because, okay or not, we will.

Everyone makes mistakes. No matter how “together” we are, how “with it,” how well-prepared for any particular moment, at times we all stumble, blunder, unwillingly expose our uncertainties, imperfections, and shortcomings. There are times for all of us when, unpleasantly taken by surprise, we are exposed as momentarily unable to cope. All it takes to feel overwhelmed is a situation that has become too much to handle. It is then that we feel helplessly foolish and embarrassed. If we have been exposed to excessive shaming as children, we may also experience the needless pain of feeling deeply ashamed. At such moments, it is hard to remember that this happens to everyone, that the awful sense of ineptness and confusion will soon pass. Most of us do not understand how to go about making new space for ourselves. We can be needlessly hard on ourselves, slower to forgive than we would be with another. (Kopp, 1976, p. vii)

The new counselor need only pay attention to the title of the book quoted above to take heart in the face of the inevitable falls that will be encountered on the journey of being a counselor: *The Naked Therapist: A Canterbury Tales Collection of Embarrassing Moments from More than a Dozen Eminent Psychotherapists!*

Bouncing back is a skill to be learned and one that will be strengthened by the very nature of our professional identity. If the counselor defines him or herself with the undertones of childhood wounding, unrealistic cultural expectations or any other perfectionist, “should” based, defensively-driven mandates, that counselor will fall harder and bounce back less easily than the one whose professional identity is defined from within a deeper core truth and a lot of self-understanding. The less-defended counselor will bounce back more easily, knowing, both cognitively and emotionally, that to be human is perfectly acceptable. It is one of the gifts of this field. Our very humanness, in its very real imperfection, is part and parcel of who we *should* be. Or else how could we ever relate to the other in front of us?

There are some guidelines to help. Note the risk for the beginner of being performance driven or, even more basically, of thinking that there is a right way (and then of course a wrong way) to do counseling.

The first stage is the dualistic or absolutist position that can also be called the “right/wrong” stage. It is characterized by the belief that a helper’s responses to a client are either right or wrong. ... This black/white, success/failure way of thinking increases internal pressure and makes the helpers overly concerned with their own performance. (Young, 2001, p. 6)

Of course there are some basic rights and wrongs but these aren’t the ones that are likely to trip us up. What will trip us up are the things that already lurk inside as doubts and fears, old messages, too high expectations and the like. Better to go in knowing you will trip...and fall...and get up again. We all do.

No matter how much craft a therapist learns, he is lost if he suppresses his power to feel ruffled, distressed, helpless, or to feel exhilarated, or even loved by a patient. The ability to react internally and at the same time to control outward behavior, is a requisite for the therapist; the good therapist has reason to be proud of his ability to feel and to know what he’s feeling. (Weinberg, 1996, p. 4)

This is the key. We will have many experiences, some good, some bad. So much will transpire in our offices. Some of it will help another human being. Some of it will not. But we will live in this world and feel the feelings that are in us and some of those that come at us. Our job is to be aware and to know how to behave. That’s why we have done our own personal work. That’s why we’ve been well trained in the profession. We’ll get mad, but will likely never scream. We’ll get sad and we’ll have to choose whether to let our sadness show. We’ll get scared and we’ll keep right on

working.

- What's likely to trip me up?
- What do I know that will help me bounce back?
- Am I willing to be human?

Going Forward

The U.S. Department of Labor tells us that counseling jobs are increasing every year with an expectation that the number of jobs for counselors will rise by 30% over the next few years. Counselors were employed in approximately 635,000 jobs in 2006. (Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2008) The field is open and continues to grow. New counselors will carry the field forward and will become the wise elders of the future. There is opportunity and responsibility in this role.

When we know ourselves deeply, even as we step into new and unknown worlds, we step in on solid footing. Any illusion we have that we will know enough, have the answers, solve the problems, cure the client, will drag us down. Knowing who we are and why we are doing this work, will enter us into a powerful world of transformation and of mystery.

One of our oldest and wisest voices in the field, James Bugental (1985), reminds us of this. He invites us *To Seek a Wild God*.

The wild god is the god of mystery. And mystery is a word too seldom found in psychological writing or psychotherapeutic discourses. We deny mystery; we pretend it exists only in the minds of children, authors, and mystics. And we fool ourselves and blind ourselves when we do so. Mystery enfolds knowledge, contains knowledge. Mystery is infinite, knowledge finite. As knowledge grows, mystery grows even more. Mystery is the latent meaning always awaiting our discovery and always more than our knowing. (p.273)

Welcome to the new professional identity that you are claiming. It is a gift, a challenge, a responsibility, and a long learning curve. It is your home away from home, your job, your calling. It is a mystery and it is a chance to be alive and to live in your own deep truth.

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