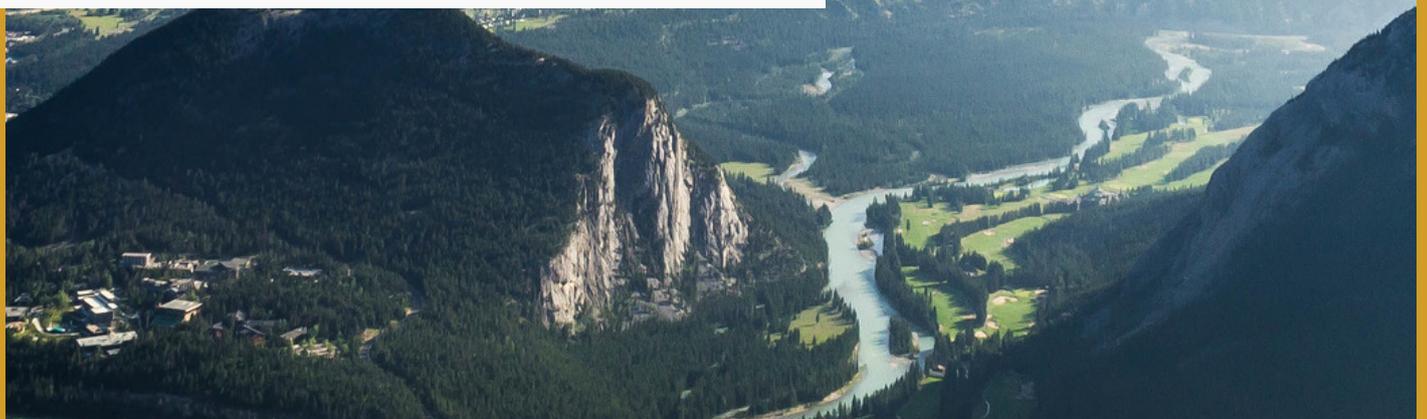


GETTING TO SABBATICAL

BY
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My father's PhD in history made me aware of the concept of sabbatical early in life. The only one he ever took was due to a Fulbright that enabled us to live in Paris for a year. It was grand. I was three.

I've used the word "sabbatical" now and then. It's a word I like. It has a big fat history behind it - Greek, Hebrew and Latin all have antecedents. It's a word essentially about rest. Cease planting the ground every seventh year, rest after making the world on the seventh day, leave work on one of the seven days of the week: divine instruction about the idea that everything needs a break from activity and routine for rest, reflection and renewal.

But in our modern lexicon, the word sabbatical has grown narrow and sits on the high shelf of academia. Tenured

professors, after much labor and achievement, earn one: time away from professorial duties, bestowed by their dean, to renew their scholarship. To sit in the quietude of the mind, whether on a beach or in a dusty archive, and deepen one's intellectual grasp of the world is an idea that makes intuitive sense to me. However, I wouldn't have said the word "sabbatical" applied to me; I wouldn't have presumed.

And then on an airplane flying to a client last summer, I was reading Hemispheres magazine and came across at least two articles with the same theme. They described people who'd achieved striking success in different professions and who'd elected to close up their businesses in order to re-invent their work - in order to come up with something entirely new.

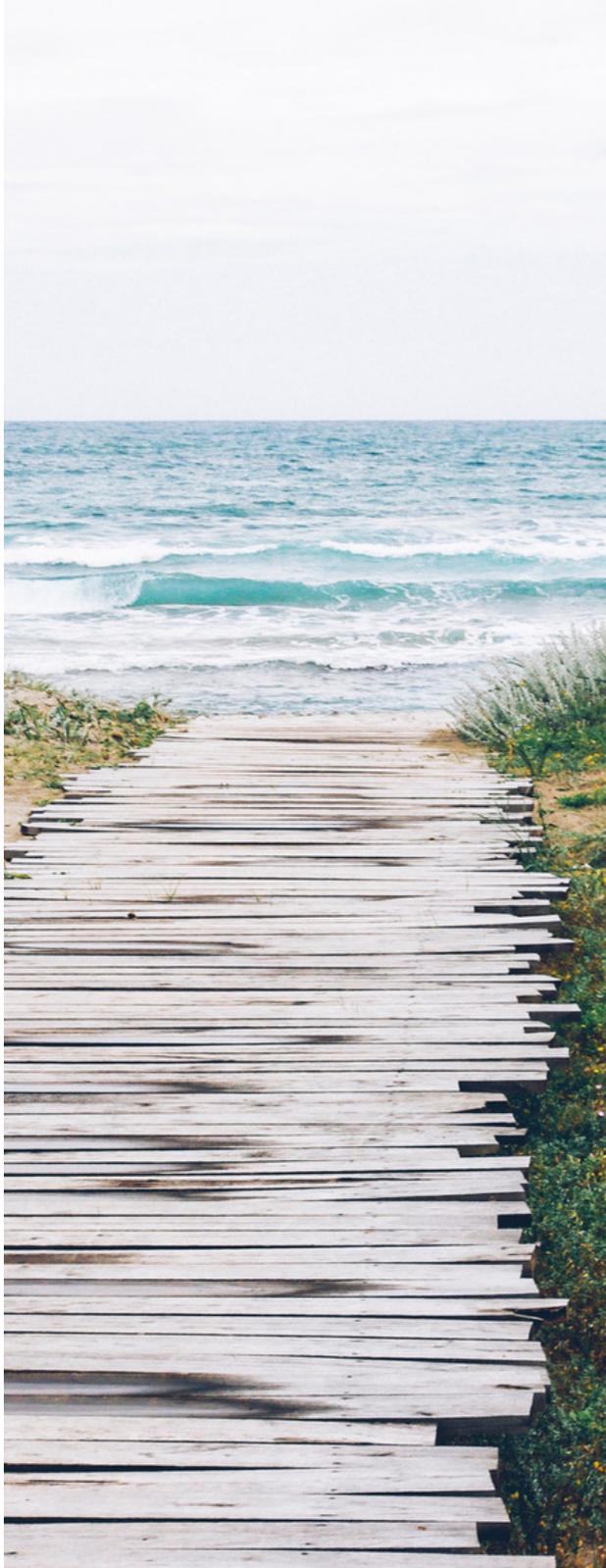
RANDALL GRAHAM, FOUNDER BONNY DOON VINEYARD

"It happened one step at a time," Randall Graham says. "One day I discovered I was in charge of an organization that was so convoluted and Borghesian in its complexity that it was beyond out-of-control." Still, had he produced any truly distinctive wine? That was the question he began to ask himself...The answer was no. "I don't think I have made a deep contribution yet." So he sold off two high-volume brands and spun off his Riesling brand into its own business. Then he took a gamble on his plan to create a vineyard of hybrids straight out of The Island of Dr. Moreau.

FERRAN ADRIA, CHEF EL BULLI

Spanish chef/guru Ferran Adria blanched the culinary world when he announced he would be shutting down his revered restaurant, El Bulli, for two years starting in 2012..."People wonder, if El Bulli is where everyone wants to go and if we are winning all the prizes, why change?" says the 47-year-old Adrian..."We've spent the last 25 years creating something new every year, but working 15 hours a day leaves us very little time to create."

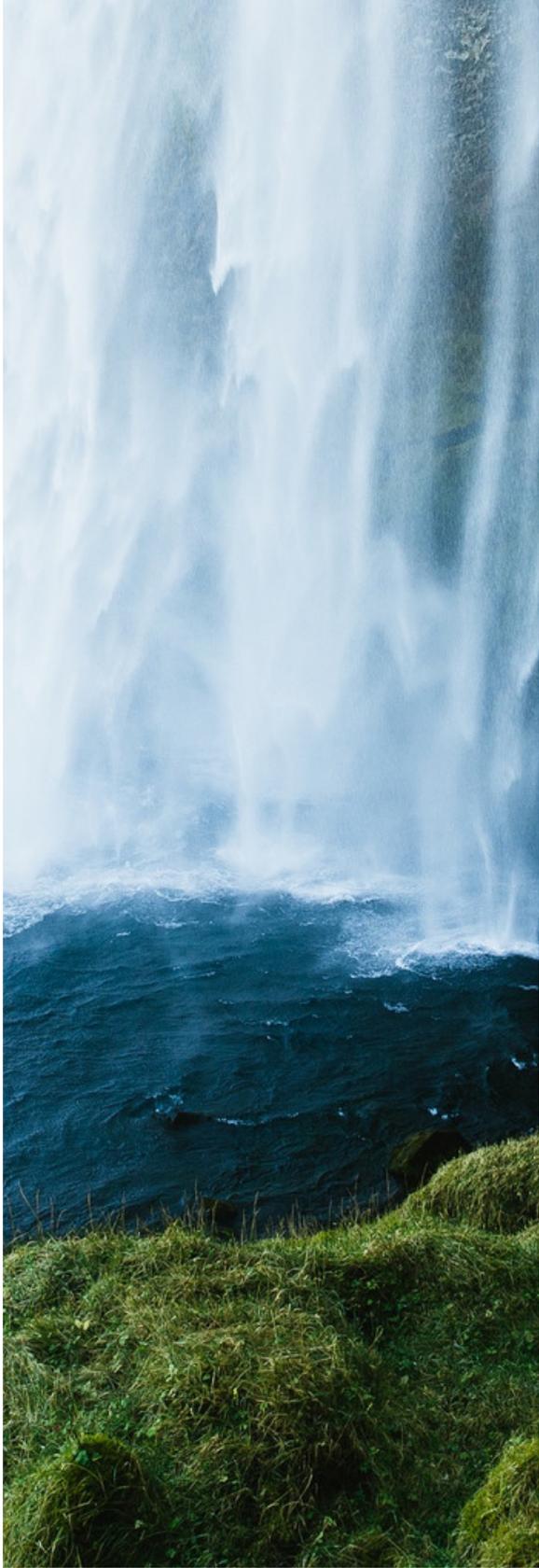
Excerpts from Hemispheres, The Grape Nut by Edward Lewine and The Thinker by S. Indramalar, July 2010 issue.



The articles remarked on the boldness, the audacity of this decision. I remember thinking, right - how can one re-invent when one is so busy doing what one does? What other choice is there but to close up shop? To take a sabbatical.

In the talk I gave my clients that week, I used the articles as a way of contextualizing our work. The client had recognized a serious dysfunction in one of its key business support areas worth about \$2B, and made the bold decision to charter this group to figure it out. The work was grueling at the beginning: looking squarely at the problem and discovering that it lay at the feet of badly outdated cultural norms and processes. No easy fix. But the group persevered and was coming out the other end, with the light of possibility shining on them. And this happened because they were willing to take time out - to step away from the day-to-day, to sit for long hours in an unglamorous room with strangers, peering deeply into the face of problem.

It is my work to be a companion on these journeys, a kind of Sherpa to help my clients navigate the shadowy terrain of uncertainty as they reinvent the new. This is a tremendous journey to experience, whether in an individual or an organization. And I saw that this too is a kind of sabbatical: a rest from routine to re-envision the work, in the fullness of the context of their world, and to rekindle both meaning and relevance. And to be clear: although sabbatical does imply rest, it does not mean inaction.



THE ACT OF CEASING WHAT ONE KNOWS TO VOYAGE INTO THE YET UNKNOWN OF THE NEW TAKES BOTH GREAT COURAGE AND GREAT CONFIDENCE.

The act of ceasing what one knows to voyage into the yet unknown of the new takes both great courage and great confidence. Yes, audacity. What if all that looking amounts to nothing? What if the grand re-visioning ends up right back where one started? What if nothing can actually change? Choosing sabbatical in the face of those fears is exactly wherein lies the beauty, the risk, the sheer mysticism of the practice.

As Chef Adria says, "There are no references. That's the magical part. That's the challenge." And Grahm wrote in a blog post just today about his nervousness in calling his vin de terroir quest "a spiritual journey."

But sabbatical is fundamentally an act of faith. Faith in oneself, in the group, in the process. Faith in the divine instruction that just by quieting, stepping off the busy-ness loop and contemplating the situation at hand will produce something new.

There is a lot of talk about doing, getting on with it, stopping the chatter and actually getting something accomplished. I am all for that. I am also for stopping now and again to consider "is all the doing working?" To ask "have things changed such that we should re-think it?" What would a whole new take on the situation mean? What would happen if you rekindled your passion; what then could you do from the engine of your heart?

We have a long history of those who took sabbatical and accomplished greatness: Christ's 40 days in the desert brought him full on into his calling; Buddha stepped all the way out of his life, never to return and achieved the highest level of human mastery; Gandhi took respite from his activism for deep self reflection, which he described in his autobiography, giving us a kind of manual for how. And more and more, I see people today, like Adria and Grahm, and organizations, like my clients, who are taking this same path. The quiet path of reflection, the active path of inactivity, from which renewal and reinvention are born.



My narrow child's view, the three-year-old's story of a father with a Fulbright - that sabbatical is something bestowed rather than chosen - veiled for me what is so obvious. Sabbatical is part of life, whether we are given it, take it for ourselves, or are somehow painfully thrust into it by circumstance.

The cycle of work and rest, going out into the world and coming back, of doing and reflecting, is as natural as breath, rising and falling. But too often, rather than celebrating the opportunity and the fruit that comes of it, we worry. Worry that it will be for naught, that we will be embarrassed, that we shouldn't be doing it, that whatever place we left, like Odysseus, will no longer be there when we return. And that worry robs us of the very gift of sabbatical itself.

And I thought, it is time for a different choice. It's time to reclaim sabbatical for us all, as a grand and ancient way of life. Time to recall the divine wisdom that says every individual, every organization, everything needs time out for reflection, for renewal, and in the stillness of inaction - or a different kind of action, to re-find meaning. And this is so we can bloom again, fuller and richer than before.

So now, I use the word freely, knowing how fortunate, august, and accessible the thing called sabbatical is. It is indeed a divine call; our first step is to heed it.

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ABOUT

ADVANCING INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY TO BRING ABOUT LARGE-SCALE CHANGE

Author, Rebecca Reynolds is CEO and Principal of RRC, a firm specializing in supporting large-scale change endeavors.



Reynolds is a pioneer in building individual and group capability to achieve visionary leadership and strategy, collaboratively developed alignment on innovative solutions, and institutional rigor in their implementation.

Reynolds acts as strategic adviser to executive leaders on complex business and leadership challenges across industries as diverse as natural resources, the arts, public policy, and IT, on issues involving diverse stakeholders and long-term effects.

RRC advances visionary strategy development and then builds the requisite capacity to achieve it. Core capacity areas include executive leadership advancement, governance redesign, IT solutions, human capital development, and collaborative process—all to enable success in dynamic and complex environments with long-term impact.

Founded in 1991, RRC has served hundreds of clients in the government and non-governmental sectors on a broad range of issues. Government clients include the USDA Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Environmental Protection Agency, as well as collaborations involving the spectrum of stakeholder interests on land management and business enterprise issues.



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