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Inspirational Stories
of Choosing Success
Over Adversity

Volume Three

PROMINENCE PUBLISHING

Six Months to Give

BY ROBIN LEVESQUE

I used to think I was lucky. After 20 years of dedicated public service, I had worked my way up to a senior management position with a six-figure income and a corner office overlooking a one-hundred-year-old green bridge crossing the South Saskatchewan River that runs through the coulees of Medicine Hat, Alberta.

As a government employee, my job was secure. My wife was working for the same employer as a friendly neighborhood tax assessor. Together with our investments, we had built a \$250K per year lifestyle. We owned a comfortable home in a new subdivision. Our dream vehicles filled the two-car garage. I even bought our 17-year-old daughter a brand new car, so we didn't have to drive her back and forth to her work.

Life was good. My wife had grown up in this little city in the prairies. We had our dream jobs in her hometown and plenty of family to socialize with. Work for me was so easy, I used to joke that I could do this job in my sleep. That's exactly what happened. I fell asleep at the wheel. This comfortable little life was about to spin out of control.

We had moved to this part of Alberta from next-door British Columbia. Prior to living and working in Medicine Hat, I had been living in Victoria, while my wife and two daughters were holding up the proverbial fort back in Kamloops. Although I was able to commute back and forth between Kamloops and Victoria every two weeks, the time apart was starting to wear on our family.

At one point, we made the conscious decision that it was time for a change. We saw three options. I could move back to Kamloops. Or, we could move the whole family to Victoria. A third option was to go somewhere entirely different. We were no strangers to moving, so this didn't scare us.

During the summer of 2008, we were visiting my in-laws in Medicine Hat. After my father-in-law finished his morning routine of going through the obituaries, my wife picked up the local newspaper and came across a job posting for a manager of the City's land department. "Check this out", she said. "Are you going to apply?" I responded that it sounded like a great opportunity, but it was "Medicine Hat".

Victoria after all, where I was living at the time, was the prime jewel of Canada's West Coast. It was like living in paradise on earth: beautiful scenery, mild temperate weather, and an exceptional lifestyle.

I had built a successful career as a public servant, first in the field of land development and marketing then as an expert project manager. Both fields were considered "endangered species" in the provincial government, because new post-secondary graduates were flocking to the private sector for higher starting salaries.

For this year-and-a-half, I had been part of the Project Management Centre of Excellence (PMCOE), an elite branch of government that was launched by a visionary Dale Christenson. In essence, I was an internal project management consultant and corporate trainer.

I was having the time of my life. I was getting paid to do what I loved to do, leading deep dive workshops on project management and negotiation with fellow public servants. I was flying all over British Columbia to help others transform the way they managed projects. I was meeting new people every day. In a very short time, I became a very effective trainer, often reaching 98% on overall satisfaction ratings from my workshop participants.

While I was in Victoria, I even started my own business to provide workshops to the private sector. Workshop development and delivery was my “retirement plan”. It seemed to generate a decent income for relatively short spurts of time on the teaching platform. It offered opportunities for travel. Furthermore, it gave me a chance to make a contribution and give my best to the world.

Leading workshops became far more than a paycheck and opportunities to travel. It was my passion ... my purpose. Even after leaving the Project Management Centre of Excellence (PMCOE) for Alberta, I continued serving clients such as Northern Health in Prince George, ProjectWorld Business Analyst World in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, Buildex in Edmonton and Seattle, Federated Press in Calgary, Eco-Cities in Nantes France, and Bard College’s MBA in Sustainability in New York City.

PMCOE had originally been set up to help high performers transition to their next big opportunity. Medicine Hat was that big opportunity.

Back in Medicine Hat in that corner office overlooking the green bridge, I often wondered though: What would it be like to be a full-time author, speaker and trainer? I would find out when I retire and could afford to work only if and when I chose to.

I yearned to be a full-time author, speaker and trainer. Even though I still loved real estate, I grew tired of the daily grind. I had a deep desire for being my own boss and making a positive difference in the world.

I could have focused more on my practice, but the money I was making in government was too good to give up. Plus, I was building a healthy pension that would someday finance my dream business. They often refer to this combination as the “golden handcuffs”. In many respects, I was sitting on the fence ... always one foot out the door.

During that time, I was introduced to the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers (CAPS) by a dear friend John Popoff. I had been mentoring John for years. He knew that CAPS was a really good fit for me. I started attending the Super Saturday event in Calgary once a month. Then I enrolled in the Fast Track program designed to teach experts who speak the business of professional speaking. So once a month, I would get up at 5:00 am for the three-hour drive to Calgary. I sat in a room with 100 of the best speakers and trainers in Southern Alberta to participate in three hours of learning best practices for professional speakers. Then I had lunch with my fellow Fast Track participants. We spent the rest of the afternoon learning tools and techniques that would change some of our lives forever.

One of the lessons I remember most from this experience is that we were asked to “pick a lane”. In other words, commit. Commit to the business of professional speaking, commit to a topic, and commit to a niche. Still, I was reluctant to give up the luxury of a secure job that I could do in my sleep and earn a six-figure income to boot. Instead, I convinced myself that I lived in the land of “AND”. I could continue working in my field AND dip my big toe into the pool that is the business of professional speaking.

During this time, I developed a special friendship with Tammy Komanchuck. Tammy was the Organization Development Officer where I worked. We first met over the telephone while I was still in Victoria to administer the Work Alignment Profile by McFletcher. It turns out that we both shared the profile “Project Manager” and hit it off. Once we started working under the same roof, we immediately started collaborating on developing and leading workshops for our co-workers in project management and interest-based negotiation.

We also co-created offsite retreats for my new team with a focus on strengths building, shared values and shared vision. Tammy and I even travelled to Lethbridge together to become certified trainers in Crucial Conversations by VitalSmarts. We brought that program back to our employer and trained over 100 co-workers in the art of conflict resolution.

Tammy became a mentor to me. She had been in the organization development field for two decades. She whet my appetite for attending the Cape Cod Institute to learn from world-class experts. She called me a “super-learner” and recognized my passion for learning, teaching and leading.

Also in the same period of time, I completed my Master of Arts in Leadership from Royal Roads University in Victoria. One of the highlights of that experience was sitting in the Lure restaurant at the Delta Hotel. I was facing the legislative building straight across on the other side of the Inner Harbour. It was a glorious day, and I longed to be back in Victoria for good. I made a wish ... which became an intention ... which drove part of my personal vision for the future. Someday, I would come back to Victoria and live the life of my dreams.

After graduating with my Masters, a lot of great things happened. I was invited to speak at the Urban Development Institute Alberta Conference, Canada Green Building Council Alberta Conference, Abbotsford Agri-Energy Forum, Ecocity World Summit in France, Royal Roads University Society of Leadership Conference, Building Communities That Create Health in Medicine Hat, and the Bard MBA in Sustainability in New York City. I felt like I was on fire.

It was the Royal Roads University Society of Leadership inaugural conference that opened my eyes to a whole new world of possibilities for leadership. One of the conference highlights was meeting one of my heroes Barry Posner. I made sure to go early with the intention of meeting Dr. Posner. It was a room set up for a couple of hundred people.

There were only two other people in the room, so I got a great seat close to the stage. And there he was ... walking straight toward me. Dr. Posner is close to seven feet tall, so he made quite an entrance. I said good morning. He stopped. We introduced each other and had a great conversation. That was a great moment.

The most profound learning that occurred for me at the conference was the exposure I gained to the emerging fields of positive psychology and mindfulness as it applies to leadership. Positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that focuses on making people happier by increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative emotions. The definition of mindfulness is "... paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally" according to Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Combined with best practices in leadership, I saw tremendous potential for a positive leadership system that could change the world.

That was the event that inspired me to finally commit to going to the Cape Cod Institute with my friend and mentor Tammy. Richard Boyatzis, another one of my superstar academic and author heroes was conducting a one-week workshop on Resonant Leadership.

After my successful encounter with Barry Posner, I repeated the same routine. I went to the workshop early. I was the first participant through the door. Professor Boyatzis was sitting at a table in the front of the room. He greeted me with a smile and asked me why I was here. I told him he was the reason I was here, that I had read his book *Primal Leadership* and taken his Coursera course on Resonant Leadership. This conversation would change my life forever.

For that entire week, I got to study a master presenter in action. Given that his son was my age, he had to have been in his seventies. And he was still working: 12 hours per day on university days and 6 hours per day on his days off, and loving it! I was truly inspired.

As a result of this workshop, I wrote down my new vision for my Ideal Self, a term coined by Professor Boyatzis. What would my ideal life look like 5, 10, 15 years from now? I would be retired from public service. I would have graduated from the Doctorate in Business Administration from the Grenoble École de Management in France. I would thrive as a best-selling author, speaker and trainer that travels all over the world to deliver my message. I would combine mini-retirements with learning adventures in Europe, Cape Cod, Whistler, Banff, Victoria and Nanaimo. And I would be helping my wife with her part-time catering business. Little did I know that only five months away awaited a major life change that would greatly accelerate my life vision.

It was a crisp Monday morning in early November 2014. I was looking at the green bridge and wondering to myself, What's today going to bring? What's this week going to look like? Then something happened that changed my life forever. I sat down at my desk. The phone rang. It was my relatively new boss's administrative assistant. It appeared that he wanted to see me in Boardroom A.

I grabbed my journal and made my way down to the first floor and walked through the door of Boardroom A. My boss was sitting across the table. To his right was sitting the HR Manager. And I thought to myself, No good is going to come of this. My boss could hardly look me in the eyes. After a moment of silence, he looked up at an empty space in the middle of the table. In this shaky voice he said, "Robin, these conversations are always hard, so I'll get straight to the point. We're letting you go. We think you've lost your passion for real estate development." That was it. Twenty plus years of dedicated public service... and this is where it ended.

I was shocked. Six years of developing and working with a one of the best real estate development teams in the world. Under my leadership, the Department had been featured as a best practices land developer and team at Urban Development Institute Alberta Conference, Canada Green Building Council Alberta Conference, Alberta Professional Planners Institute Conference, Abbotsford Agri-Energy Forum, Ecocity World Summit, Royal Roads University Society of Leadership Conference, and Medicine Hat Building Communities That Create Health. I even went to share my vision and mission of leadership in sustainable development at the Bard MBA in Sustainability class in New York City on my own dime.

My now ex-boss then handed me over to the HR Manager and left the room. The HR Manager went over my package and my options. He escorted me over to my office, where my wife was waiting. She looked at me with this look of fear and stress all over her face and body. "You got fired?" she asked. "Yes, but this could be the best thing that ever happened to us", I replied. When she left, I handed over my cell phone and access card to the HR Manager. I looked at the green bridge from this vantage point one last time. At that moment, the green bridge became a metaphor for the next four years of my life.

A bridge connects the end of one road to the beginning of another road on the other side of an obstruction such as a river. A bridge is part of the road network, but it's distinct. It's a relatively short distance compared to the rest of the road it connects to. And it has a very specific purpose. It's a transition from one side of the river to the other.

Have you ever experienced a sense of complete relief and anger at the same time? This is a rare occurrence reserved for a select few moments in our lives called chronic stress. These moments are characterized by the newness to the experience. Getting fired is something I had never experienced in my life or even considered a remote possibility. The outcome was uncertain. Recall that my wife and I had built a quarter of a million dollar lifestyle that included two houses, three cars and extensive travel. There was a tremendous threat to my ego. Oh no, this couldn't be happening to me! Finally, I had absolutely no control over the outcome. I couldn't even influence any decision prior to that moment in time. No one asked me for my input. There was no opportunity to negotiate.

I recovered relatively quickly. By the next week, I was teaching a class at the University of Calgary's Urban Planning Masters Program. Within a couple of months, I was teaching an entire certificate in project management at the local community college. This was the perfect segue into the next phase of my life. In one fell swoop, almost all of my five-year plan was well on its way to becoming a five-month reality. I hadn't been able to choose a path, so the universe decided for me! This was my green bridge.

During the following two-and-a-half years, I pursued my combined passion for learning, teaching and leading workshops. I joined CAPS National and its Calgary Chapter and attended several more events including a national convention in Toronto.

I continued teaching the certificate in project management and also joined the corporate training team at the college. And I collaborated with the college administrators on developing a certificate in positive leadership that we later piloted.

Life was great, but finances were tough. We sold both houses. We lost some money on the Medicine Hat house due to poor market conditions. We made some on the townhouse in Kamloops.

Our daughter had already moved out by now, and my wife and I downsized considerably. At our main house on the prairies, we filled an entire construction bin with unused items and junk we had collected over 15 years of moving around British Columbia and Alberta. We placed everything else that we didn't need for day-to-day subsistence in a storage unit.

For almost a whole year, we lived like vagabonds. We stayed for six months in the partially finished basement at my in-laws with our two dogs Bam and Chiko. Then we did the same for three months with my friend and mentor Tammy.

We were ready for a move... not sure to where, but we were ready. We did manage to narrow it down to either Calgary or somewhere on Vancouver Island. Our daughter had been living in Nanaimo for over a year, and we missed her dearly. As it turns out, the universe came calling once again.

I got a call from a recruiting firm in Vancouver. They were responding to an application I had submitted for an executive director position in Victoria. The world of real estate had opened its lucrative door for me once again. I got the job. Because most of our belongings were in storage, we were able to mobilize fairly quickly. Before long, we were reunited with our daughter. Within months, she made the move from Nanaimo to Victoria and was living in our basement. Life had made its way back to some form of normal... for now.

After only a year-and-a-half in what I thought would be my dream job, it happened again... the perfect storm.

I came to work and I met with my team to prepare for my bi-weekly meeting with my boss. I felt well prepared, but as it turns out, not for what lay ahead.

My boss showed up at my office door on time and as planned. He asked me if we could meet in a boardroom nearby. On our way, we exchanged pleasantries and asked about each other's weekend.

This scenario felt familiar. I walked into the boardroom and was introduced to a woman from HR. Now I knew that no good would come of this... again! My gut feeling was confirmed. I was terminated without cause: no reason; without cause; period.

What followed could have been the worst six months of my life. I had just lost what I thought was going to be my dream job. My marriage of almost 20 years was breaking down. We were \$200K in debt. We already had to sell both our houses to pay down even more accumulated debt, essentially wiping out all of our equity. I had grown way too dependent on alcohol and nicotine for stress relief, and it was starting to affect my health. And to top it all off, my very first pet ever, a dog named Bam had fallen sick, and it was time to put him down. I was burning out... fast!

Any one of these experiences qualifies as a major life event... a significant change. Combined together, given the sequence of events and how fast everything came at me had the makings of a major mid-life crisis. I remembered what Richard Boyatzis said in Cape Cod: "If you don't have your mid-life crisis in your forties, it's going to hit you like a freight train in your fifties!"

Instead, it turned out to be the best times of my life... one of self-discovery and profound transformation. It was a time to discover "New Robin". Even though I was 53 years old, this was only the halfway mark of my life. Whatever decisions I wish I had made in the first half of my life, I could make in the second half.

My first priority was dealing with the stress of losing a job, a marriage and a dog all at the same time. I needed to nurture my spirit, mind and body. What the latest scientific research says about maximizing health and longevity is directly proportional to what we do every day ... the choices we make and how they influence our biology: sleep, meditation, exercise, breathing, eating, and harvesting positive emotions for healthy relationships.

Fortunately, I had built a strong foundation over most of my adult life. I already meditated almost every day, exercised regularly, ate healthy food and slept well. Plus, I experimented with alternative modalities for preventive health such as yoga, sports massage therapy, chiropractic treatments, reflexology, and acupuncture.

Stress was my enemy though, and I had known this for a long time. According to Deepak Chopra, "stress is a real or perceived threat ... that interferes with the spontaneous flow of cosmic intelligence". A common definition of stress in my Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) learnings is a real or perceived threat that we feel we are not equipped to deal with. I later discovered that it's not the stress that kills us ... it's our perception of stress.

Deepak Chopra says that stress interferes with the cosmic flow of intelligence. In one of his online course modules, I was able to quickly write down 10 moments of extreme stress and emotional pain in my life starting as early as age nine and as recent as the past two months. More on this later. Dr. Chopra says that: “Karma is a prison. Life is a flow between the banks of pleasure and pain. Without the play of opposites, there is no experience. Experience is always by contrast.” I decided to test this theory.

How could I release that which did not serve me? How could I let go of limiting beliefs, negative thoughts and emotions like fear and anger, and bad habits? I sought out some extra help from some interesting resources. I signed up for SynchroDestiny with Dr. Chopra online. I joined the Transcendence master class with the Food Matters TV, also online. I am still taking Unlimited Abundance with Mindvalley. And there was the live course in Mindfulness in the Workplace at Royal Roads University.

These were all very useful, but the real transformation occurred in a one-hour coaching session with my friend and colleague Nathalie Plamondon-Thomas. She guided me through a meditation to release the fear and anger of loss in my life. It turns out that, like many of us, I had a long history of ups and downs. Sometimes you win; sometimes you lose. Although I had generally won more often than lost, I had some significant limiting beliefs and built-up anger and fear of loss. Together, we released the anger and fear caused by those 10 emotionally painful events I had identified in Dr. Chopra’s course.

Soon after, my wife and I separated. We had known prior that each of us was living through a mid-life transformation. We both refused to call it mid-life crisis because we chose to remain positive and seek out the opportunities that would make this transformation possible. We both discovered that we were far better at being friends than a married couple. I didn’t lose a wife, I gained a best friend for life. We now tell people in jest that we are “happily separated”.

From a career perspective, I realized with the help of my book coach that I needed to work on my mindset, business knowledge and marketing savvy. This was my big chance to finally pursue my goal as a full-time author, speaker and trainer.

I was, and still am, living the “perfect day every day”. Mornings started early between 5:00 and 6:00 am. I spent the first two-to-three hours of each day on self-care: pre-meditation, meditation, journaling, reading uplifting content, and learning. I would have my power breakfast and work on the business for three hours. Then I walked my dog Chiko for 45 minutes down to, and back from, the Inner Harbour. When we got home, I made and ate my power lunch. Then I would go to the local café for coffee and 90 minutes of writing. Then I had the option of writing some more or going to the local gym. All of these activities were within easy walking access. My dream vehicle, a 2014 Jeep Wrangler Unlimited sat in my driveway for weeks at a time. My daughter used it more than I did. Yes, I was living the perfect mini-retirement once again.

The fourth month into the journey is when I made a conscious decision to give for the following six months. I would give my best content to the world through my website, LinkedIn, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. I would give my time to worthwhile causes and my first coaching clients. I would give away the first three chapters of my book to anyone who wanted it.

Around this time, I was also planning an amazing learning adventure. CAPS National Convention was coming to Vancouver in December 2018. A learning adventure for me is when I purposefully integrate all four major domains of my life when the primary purpose of a trip away from home is learning at say a workshop or conference.

I got to meet one of my childhood heroes, Rick Hanson, “The Man in Motion”, in person. I got to sit down and have breakfast with Miss Canada 2018, Maria Giorlando. I mingled with so many wonderful people... experts who speak for a living. And I met Mitra Mohamadzadeh, a PhD Candidate in Human Resources who is very passionate about helping people discover themselves through self-awareness, clarity of personal vision and goal setting. We discovered that we had so much in common that we are now collaborating on a book entitled *Border Crossers: Where Positive Change Meets Positive Leadership*.

Looking back, that CAPS Conference was a tipping point for me. The people I met helped me become more self-aware of what I needed to do to succeed as an author, speaker and trainer. There is nothing like fully immersing yourself in your vocation for three full days.

For my journey prior to that tipping point, it was important for me to believe that there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. This too would pass. There’s good in every experience. My friend Dale Christenson later compared these phases of our life as a dreary day in Vancouver. You step outside under the clouds and the rain. It’s not pleasant, but you know it won’t last forever. Because you know that above those clouds the sun shines bright. And one day soon those clouds will part and the sun will shine its warm rays down on you once again.

In my search for meaning, I received many signs from the universe. I was attracting everything that matched my energetic vibration. I had the strength to leave the past behind. It was time to create a new beginning and to make my decision. The words from my Fast Track training still resonated with me: “pick a lane”.

I needed to allow my true individuality to wake up, channel and speak my soul's truth. I was ready to make a difference in the world, to recognize and seize opportunities all around me. All I needed to do is be open and stay positive all the way!

Hitting the perfect storm of life a second time in less than four years was my ultimate wake up call. The universe was telling me to pick a different green bridge, maybe a blue bridge. It was a time of deep transition. One day, I could help people that go through their own transitions in life: careers, businesses, mid-life and beyond.

There was a noticeable threshold between the end of 2018 and the new beginning that is 2019. My intentions for 2019 are posted on the wall next to my fridge. I look at them every day.

I have great spiritual, mental and physical health. I am in the best shape of my life spiritually, mentally and physically. I have great relationships. My ex-wife and I are best friends. My special bond with my youngest daughter has grown to a whole new level. She is my rock.

I am building the business of my dreams as an author, speaker and trainer. This includes working on my first of many best-selling books, Resonate to Co-Create: a Transformative Learning Adventure Into Positive Leadership. My company DREAM MK + Leadership is destined to become a world leader in leadership training and development. I am learning how to monetize living my perfect day every day.

There is so much joy and happiness in my life. The extraordinary has become the ordinary.

I am not one hundred percent sure what will happen next. But here's what I know for sure: the universe has my back. I am going to be just fine.

What I learned at an even deeper level during these turbulent times is that it's really important to know myself better than anyone else does. This includes an ever-higher level of awareness, attention and intention... constant searching and never giving up.

I also need to know my big "Why". What's my personal vision; what's my purpose in life? If I don't know this, I could be living somebody else's dream.

It's also important to make a plan... and a plan B, and a plan C. There is comfort in knowing I have options. I need to follow the plan yet have enough flexibility to let in new opportunities.

I also appreciate the importance of commitment. Driving down the middle of the road is a dangerous place to be. I need to pick a lane and go for it.

Finally, I need to measure what matters. What gets measured gets done. Combined with self awareness, observing your actions, behaviors and habits gives me great insight into my beliefs and values.

I would like to close this chapter with a quote from spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi:

"YOUR BELIEFS BECOME YOUR THOUGHTS, YOUR THOUGHTS BECOME YOUR WORDS, YOUR WORDS BECOME YOUR ACTIONS, YOUR ACTIONS BECOME YOUR HABITS, YOUR HABITS BECOME YOUR VALUES, YOUR VALUES BECOME YOUR DESTINY."

About the Author Robin Levesque

Robin Levesque helps organizations co-create positive leadership at every level. His workshops inspire managers and their teams to build healthy employee engagement in the workplace. He also coaches high performers to help them discover their strengths, clarify their personal vision, and develop effective personal learning and resiliency plans.

Results include a healthier workforce, increased productivity, higher employee engagement, better alignment of people and resources, progress on meaningful work, happier employees and customers, and less cynicism, absenteeism, and turnover.

Robin's credentials include 18 years as an industry leader in real estate development, 12 years as a workshop leader, a Master of Arts in Leadership and professional membership in the Project Management Institute, the Canadian Association of Professional Speakers, and the Real Estate Institute of British Columbia.

Robin is the right presenter for your next event if you want your people engaged and embracing the vision of positive leadership and co-creation including personal mastery, team building, and organizational development.

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