

Where you sit doesn't have to determine where you stand...



Kathy Simons (WTS-LA President), Photo © John Livzey

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Never underestimate the power of coffee.

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T. S. Eliot declared, “I measure out my life in coffee spoons.” Though he was mocking perfectionism in life and adding his revulsion of ritual, J. Alfred Prufrock is not exactly someone Eliot wants us to emulate. In fact, we’re supposed to learn from his mistakes, fears, and the negative example he sets. And I have. I just love coffee and the ritual of having a chin-wag over a cup of joe with a dear old friend. And that’s exactly what I did recently.

She’s retiring, very soon. And like many people on that end of the work spectrum, there was a reflective quality to much of what she said. On looking back over a very long and successful career, she spoke of things she learned, but paid particular attention to her most recent experiences, lessons learned very late in her career. I thought what she said was brilliant and holds particular importance for women and men at any stage in their careers. Here are the choicest bits of the wisdom she imparted.

Life is not binary. But sometimes, binary constructions are the easiest way to express complex concepts. And when she started talking about the keys to career success, things got complex pretty quickly. So, when she spoke of goal setting, she boiled it down to the fact that there were basically two kinds of people: *forward thinking* and *backward looking*. Now, when I talk about forward-thinking people, we all think about being progressive, ambitious, and innovative. Backward looking conjures up thoughts of someone who is afraid of the future, ignorant of social, cultural, or business norms, and too cautious to meaningfully advance. Maybe they don’t like change or they look only at the past for decision making. In many ways, they are J. Alfred Prufrock. Or so I thought...

My friend had another take. She said, “Sometimes the back of the line gives you a better picture of what the future looks like.” Huh? Just when I thought I had this stuff figured out, she threw in a curve. But she was right. Think about it. For many of us, we establish a goal in our minds and set up a strategic plan to reach that goal. In many ways, that’s the norm. And we expect that everyone else does the same thing or something very much like it. But some folks think differently. What if you focus on the process and learn what the goal is upon arrival? Does that make one “afraid of the future, ignorant of social, cultural, or business norms, and too cautious to advance?” Of course, it doesn’t. So, what was my friend going on about?

There is no one way to think, work, or plan your career. Though many of us do follow a certain structure to achieve success, that does not mean that everyone does it that way or that there is no benefit in expanding our horizons and trying to think like others do, of applying their approach to our circumstances. And that’s the smartest piece of career advice I think I’ve ever heard.

Post Date: June 4, 2018

I read a book called, “Stop Setting Goals If You Would Rather Solve Problems,” by an executive mentor named Bob Biehl. And while I have some issues with the book, I found his binary construct invaluable. It spoke to me. While I was always a goal setter, I knew a lot of people that were problem solvers. And that’s how they approached the world. So, they found it incredibly challenging to develop strategic plans with overarching long-term goals. But tactically, they were brilliant, much better than I was at problem solving. When I discovered their proclivity, I would help them, teach them about strategic thinking, and by and large they would get it. And they helped me develop my problem-solving, tactical skills. And that’s what this is all about.

WTS-LA comprises many different types of people. We’ve got forward thinkers, backward lookers, goal setters, problem solvers, and who knows what else. Which one are you? Maybe you approach your career through two of those perspectives. But the important thing is to figure it out. Identify how you look at your career and then contact someone within the chapter to see how they do it. Are you different? Complementary? Either way, work with each other and others to apply these perspectives to your careers. Develop tactical actions and strategic plans to advance each other. Use the collective wisdom of our peers—of our perspectives—to determine where you need to go and how you need to get there. Learn to use those other perspectives to help augment your own.

I, too, measure out my life in coffee spoons, but for me that’s a good thing. Like I said, I love the process and the coffee. But whether you like coffee, tea, or kava, it is not about the drink; it’s about the process. So, use the process. Contact one, two, three, or more WTS-LA members and spoon out the java along with the wisdom to help each other advance in the transportation industry.

But in truth, never underestimate the power of coffee.