

Future focused? Creating a Plan B



By **Heidi Stevens, Tribune Newspapers**

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It didn't feel like much of a gift at the time.

Eight months pregnant with our second kid, sweating day care costs for our first, and wondering, often aloud, whether our 6-year-old town house was an investment or a sinkhole, we got word of pending layoffs at my husband's company.

We quickly kicked into backup-plan mode. As in, let's come up with one.

With national unemployment stuck at 9.1 percent, a record number of home foreclosures and a national landscape of pessimism, backup plans are a stark and prevailing reality. They're necessary and grown-up and fiscally responsible.

They're also a big fat distraction from the here and now. How much energy can we devote to our current careers when we're soul searching about our next? How invested do we get in our communities, knowing circumstances may require us to pull up roots in search of cheaper pastures? And how do we focus — just focus — on our kids, our friendships, our passions when we're mentally calculating our next move?

"Life isn't certain like it was before, and that causes anxiety," says Susan Kaiser Greenland, who runs Inner Kids children's program through the Mindful Awareness Research Center at the [University of California](#) at Los Angeles. "You've got bills coming in that are greater than the revenue coming in, and no amount of mindfulness is going to change that."

But Kaiser Greenland and other experts in her field insist that cultivating a backup plan — in the form of aspirations, lofty pursuits, even outrageous dreams — leads us to richer, more authentic lives.

In many cases, backup planning introduces us to our real selves.

My husband was laid off that month. We delivered a baby with a distressing amount of uncertainty as to whether we actually had health insurance at the time. I returned to work earlier than I wanted to and more often than I wanted to, and we spent close to a year running through various scenarios from public school lotteries and ill-timed home sales to the heck with it all let's move in with my folks and cut all our costs and start our dream business.

We started asking ourselves questions, in other words, we hadn't bothered asking when things were running along smoothly.

Planning ahead

"Life unfolds, and things happen," says psychotherapist Ronald Alexander, author of "Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss and Change" (New Harbinger Publications). "If you don't take time for mindful inquiry, for knowing yourself, things just happen, as opposed to them happening in a structured, guided way."

Planning ahead and switching gears is not a new phenomenon. The average baby boomer, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, held 11 jobs from ages 18 to 44. The trick is to plan ahead while also tending to your present self.

"You're working on a dual track," says Alexander. "On track A you're taking care of the here and now and raising your children and paying your rent or mortgage and doing the best possible job you can do. But secondarily you're cultivating something that inspires you so you're not just going through every day and it's just drudgery."

Your inspiration may be building a dream home or publishing a novel or teaching literacy to impoverished youths. It may mean a smaller paycheck in exchange for work that feeds your soul. Or it could mean investing in a career that delivers a whole lot more cash at the end of the month. The point is you're envisioning your next move and embracing, not fearing, it.

Brooklyn-based artist Amy Stringer-Mowat was working as a merchandiser for Kiehl's skin care when she designed a series of state-shaped bamboo cutting boards for her 2010 wedding. In August of that year, she

featured the cutting boards on her Etsy shop, Aheirloom. They captured the discerning eye of several holiday gift guide editors and she found herself filling orders for 5,000 cutting boards by December. She's since sold about 10,000 and signed a contract with Amazon.

"I think it's important to always be resourceful and keep your interests going," says Stringer-Mowat, 36. "When you're working for a large corporation it can feel redundant and never-ending, and I think that helped me think more about what I'd like to do in my free time and what I could learn from working for a corporation that would help me pursue those interests."

Ultimately, those interests can guide you toward a more fulfilling life — whether that means a career change that lets you use your current skills in a new way or learning to excel at a new pursuit. Stringer-Mowat no longer works in corporate America, devoting her time instead to Aheirloom and preparing for her first child, due in October.

"We're making a living, but we also have the flexibility to have a child and take time off for our family," she says. "And obviously we're getting to know ourselves through the process."

Be deliberate, Alexander says.

"You have to write it down," he says. "You have to, minimally, once or twice a week, take time for mindful meditation or contemplation or prayer where you're in a state of mindful inquiry. What's important in my life? What do I value? What's the pain I'm going to experience if I don't do what I dream about in three, five, 10 years? And then what's the pleasure if I do it?"

Staying present

All this isn't to say you shouldn't revel in the richness — and chaos — of your current life.

"Mindfulness is when you can be in the middle of something chaotic and shift your awareness so you're able to hold all of it without feeling anxiety," says Kaiser Greenland. "You recognize your mind is racing or your heart is racing or you're panicking about money. But you bring those feelings into awareness and just sit with them for a while."

Experiencing your emotions — good and bad — as they happen can be incredibly calming and empowering, she says. "You recognize the emotion, but you don't take it and run with it: 'Oh my god, my kids will never go to college; I'm going to lose my house; I don't know what's going to happen next month.'"

Instead, you recognize your triggers. And those can inspire you to craft a backup plan that's both realistic and worthy of your talents.

"There's a difference between wanting something more fulfilling and just wanting something better," says Alexander. "If you're always wanting something better, you have to deal with your issues of dissatisfaction

and internal emptiness — always searching for that perfect mate or perfect job. You want to reach for that next aspiration because you desire a more compelling, challenging, fulfilling relationship, role, occupation. Not because of lust or greed or anger."

The right change

Some key questions, Alexander says, can help you gut-check your ambitions.

"Is this going to make a difference in your life? How will this make a difference in the world? And is this going to bring you satisfaction and fulfillment and give you the sense that you pushed yourself and played at your creative edge?"

In our family, the layoff did end up being a gift. My husband landed a job he enjoys and spends less time commuting to. Our late-night discussions brought a number of tangential topics into focus — living within our means, better dividing kid-raising duties, not allowing our identities to be so closely tied to our careers.

And it made us better backup planners.

"The people I see who are really happy are the people who have a compelling vision in their lives that's not the accumulation of more stuff or more money," says Alexander, "but a desire to do good in the world and create something that makes a difference."

Backup-planning your relationships

Online dating has made it easier than ever to backup-plan your way through the singles scene. Sure, she's cute and smart. But eight other women checked out my profile this week. Is she the cutest and smartest?

"I know people who are going on four to six coffee dates a week," thanks to online matchmaking, says Ronald Alexander, author of "Wise Mind, Open Mind: Finding Purpose and Meaning in Times of Crisis, Loss and Change" (New Harbinger Publications). "I tell people, 'Before you go on that sixth date, maybe you want to write down the three most important values you're looking for in a relationship.'"

If you identify — and then, eureka! locate them — it may be easier to block the temptation to go down every possible dating path you're offered.

"What are the core values I need in a partner, what is the core connection I want to experience when I'm with someone and what are the three most compelling questions I want to ask someone and that I want to be asked?" Alexander suggests. "There's so much volume available that you literally need to be able to narrow it down."

As for those three compelling questions, he's a fan of: "What motivates you? What inspires you? And where do you get support in your life?"

"And wait to see how many questions they ask you," he says. "That's a real telling point early on."

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