

I am starting a new career. Even as I say this I look behind me quickly, furtively, suggesting with the turn of my head that someone else may have said that. “I am?” I say. Is that what I’m doing? I’ve never said that before, never declared who I am, work wise. So maybe it’s not starting a new career, as if there were an old one. I’m starting my first career. Up to now everything has been prep. It’s been testing. It’s been tentative.

Immediately I’ve got an irreconcilable problem with my ego. I’m over fifty.

I shoulda done this when I was in my 20’s. It’s too late now. I can’t start to find myself now. I’ve blown it and there’s no recovery. I can’t weasel out of the fact that my life (and, really, what other life is there besides my *work* life?) is damn near over and I haven’t even started?

Tentative? Testing? Prep? What exactly have I been doing? I rush to say “Don’t answer that!” as if refusing to answer will spare me some embarrassment.

A dream found me on the bridge of a supertanker, steaming along, feeling that I didn’t really know where I was, or, particularly, where I was going. The compass and GPS navigation devices did not seem to be working. It was a sunny day; there was only open ocean—I could not get any direction bearings from land—something said “check the rudder”. I found it was not only fouled with debris, it had lost its alignment. I thought I had been steaming “straight” but in fact had been traveling for months, maybe years, in a large circle; the absence of land and working navigation equipment along with the gentle angle of the rudder had fooled me. I hacked off the seaweed and re-aligned the rudder; now at least I could have confidence that I was going in the direction I pointed the ship.

It occurred to me that the ship had in fact been going completely the wrong way. Reflecting within the dream, I reassured myself that maybe going in circles was better than closing in on the wrong port. I made a decision (this is not easy) to use my heart to re-calibrate my navigation equipment. With that, I knew I had to turn the ship around. I slammed the rudder hard over. Nothing happened. I realized that I wasn’t in a sailboat—I was driving a supertanker—it takes a mile to stop this puppy even with the engines in full reverse.

Today, awake, I feel the full weight of resistance on the rudder. “Never give up” joins “Never too late” as chants against the inertia, indifference and size of the social ocean lumbering under my hull. Waves hitting the ship slam into the rudder, which toys with the wheel, and me, like a wad of yarn in the paws of a kitten. It’s serious to the kitten, and me, and child’s play to the ocean. Modest swells cause the wheel to lift me off the deck and I wonder how hard I’ll be slammed into the side of the wheelhouse when a big wave hits this sucker. My arms ache from the tension of holding the wheel full over while my eyes scan the wake for some indication that this giant slug of a ship is indeed turning. That the wake looks pretty straight is no comfort to my fatigue—to spare myself the pain of helpless awareness, I decide to only look forward.

I may not know where I am, much less where I'm going, but I know I'm not going in a circle any more. I bounce between "Don't just do something, sit there!", which would advise me to shut off the engines and just listen for a while, and "Ready Fire Aim" which would advise me to steam off somewhere, anywhere, and figure it out underway. I'd describe my journey to date as restless rather than focused, wandering rather than sequential, lucky rather than deserving. I don't really know how I ended up with this tanker-like life; like the dream, I woke up with it rather than spent years consciously constructing it. I'm stunned by its size, inertia, and slow responsiveness—is this what I've been doing all these years?

What about the new career? Isn't there a brightness, a freshness, a face in the breeze, sun shiny captain-of-my-ship kinda snap here? The reality is that I'm proclaiming this career as a direction, a concept, an intention. I've yet to carry my first cargo to port safely. I've yet to get paid. I've yet to know my crew won't mutiny. I've yet to struggle with equipment failures, storms, sirens of the sea.

There's some fine line here between the cowboy / trucker / top gun "just do it" jock mentality which would urge me forward—Damn the Torpedoes / Full Speed Ahead—and the "who are you kidding?" sentiment that would urge me to flip burgers at McDonalds. Then I remind myself that I've always been one to push the phrase "it's better to ask forgiveness than permission."

From whom should I ask forgiveness for starting on a new career without any formal preparation?

My woman.

From whom should I ask forgiveness if I stop the engines and drift awhile?

My man.

Who's more important?