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BUSINESS

MY BIG BREAK

Family journal sparks renewed ardor for calling

Posted: February 22, 2009

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Who would have thought someone's big break would come in a vintage wooden cigar box, made in Honduras and stamped, "50 Cazadores" (hunters or seekers, as the word translates)?

As a speech-language pathologist in private practice, working primarily with deaf children wearing cochlear implants, my big break came in the form of the small, tattered journals inside that box, entrusted to me by my father, Clarence McConkey, about five years ago. They were the memories and evidence of a life well-lived, of a United Methodist pastor devoted to the congregations he served, yet struggling each day to balance his parishioners' needs with those of his family and his own need for rejuvenation.

This big break was really a breakthrough, leading me to take a new approach to my practice, and in doing so, to relate more authentically to my patients and colleagues. As I read Dad's journals, I recognized a parallel to my own vocational life that stopped me in my tracks. I read back over my own journals and realized how often my spirituality intersected with my vocation -- how frequently I had written of my quest to recapture the original calling that brought me to this profession and for the energy to continue this rewarding, yet often heart-breaking, work with special-needs children and their families.

I knew my father had dealt with the same issues I encountered. I began to speak to colleagues from many professions and heard a recurring theme -- people are on a quest for jobs that sustain not only their checking accounts but their deeper need for meaning in life. In our present economic climate, this quest may be more elusive than ever, yet sustaining

RELATED INFORMATION

Amy McConkey Robbins

- **Age:** 53.
- **Job title:** Speech-language pathologist and owner of Communication Consulting Services.
- **About the company:** Communication Consulting Services provides speech, auditory and language therapy, consults with school districts, and leads workshops nationally and internationally. McConkey Robbins works with children with cochlear implants or hearing aids, as well as those with language-based academic difficulties.
- **Experience:** She was an aural rehab supervisor at Boys Town Research Hospital in Nebraska; a consultant to 3M International in Brussels, Belgium; and has worked in the ENT Department at Indiana University School of Medicine.
- **Education:** Bachelor's degree in psychology from Hollins College (Virginia); diploma in linguistics from University of Leeds; and master's degree in speech and hearing science from Purdue University.
- **Personal:** She and her husband, Clay, have three sons. Her hobbies include playing piano duets with her husband.

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one's spirit is surely more critical now than in better times.

I made changes in my practice -- to be open to opportunities that took me outside my comfort zone. I had done this years ago, when an important break brought me to Indianapolis from Nebraska. Dr. Richard Miyamoto, chairman of the Ear Nose and Throat Department at the Indiana [University](#) School of Medicine, had hired me to work on his team when he and a handful of other pioneering surgeons around

the world began performing cochlear implant surgeries on children.

Stepping out of my comfort zone again 25 years later, I consented to my father's suggestion that we write a book together about the issues of professional burnout and the quest for re-energizing the spirit. Four years later, we finished our book, "Whirlwinds and Small Voices," a seven-day discipline of vocational renewal.

A second project was to collaborate with my music therapy colleague, Chris Barton, to develop an integrated speech and music therapy program. A little over a year ago our [curriculum](#), Tuneups, was published. Invitations to speak about these projects have added a fulfilling dimension that complements my therapy practice.

The cigar box with those journal entries sits in my office, a sentry silently questioning me, "Am I still committed to 'hunting' for a life where the inward and outward person are one? In [business](#), are we 'seekers' of renewal in this difficult economic climate, devoted to our work, but never forgetting the commitment to those most precious to us?"

By Amy McConkey Robbins

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