



CFlisi

writer, PR professional, mother, dog-lover, traveler. See more at www.paroleanima.com

Sep 27 · 5 min read

Five life lessons at lunch



Ben sat down next to me at lunch on the second day of the conference.

[1]

I knew his name, that he was a math teacher, wore a wedding ring, and was quieter than some of the other conference attendees. His accent was a softened version of Cockney. He looked to be in his early 50s, though he was slender and boyish looking and could have been younger.

He had been keeping to himself during the conference, so I didn't know how much of a conversationalist he would be during our lunch break. Plus—well—a MATH teacher? Our table talk might be about as exciting as actuarial tables. But everyone around us was engaged in animated discussion, so it was worth a shot. I chose a softball question to get him started: “So, Ben, what made you decide to become a teacher?”

He looked uncomfortable. His round eyes orbbed. He was sorting out whether my question was an indirect criticism of his choice. After a few seconds, he decided that my interest was genuine, and began to unfold.

“I didn’t originally want to be a teacher. I was born in Cheapside, London, so you know. . . the Cockney accent. I was clever at school but didn’t work very hard and didn’t think about going on to higher education. My dad was a postal clerk and no one in our family had done university. After high school, my dad says he won’t support me anymore and I’d best to get myself a job. I wound up working at the London Stock Exchange as a delivery boy.

The work was okay but boring. Sometimes I used my math skills to figure weights and postage and delivery times and such. Folks noticed and slowly gave me more to do like that. I enjoyed it and was good at it so that eventually I found myself in first-line management.

The money was better and the work was more interesting but I looked around and saw that I was stuck. The real managers spoke with proper English accents, not Cockney. And they had all gone to Oxbridge {Oxford or Cambridge}. I worked on my accent but the big problem was the degree. I couldn’t afford to stop working and go back to school full time, so I decided to take the state accounting exams. I figured if I were a Chartered Accountant, I would be treated with more respect. And that’s what happened. I studied at home, passed the exams, and became a Royal Chartered Accountant. And they treated me with more respect at the office.

1. Life lesson number one: don’t let your background be an excuse. If you can’t work with it, work around it

After 10 years at the Stock Exchange, I had risen as high as I was likely to go, and I was again becoming bored with my job.

A colleague told me that the government was hiring math types for new jobs in telecoms. I didn’t know anything about telecoms but I took the exam anyway. It was all maths and I came out on top. So I quit my job in The City and started this new government position.

2. Life lesson number two: Good skills may compensate for a lack of experience in a new industry

My job was to organize bandwidth allocation for telecoms in the UK. My first day at work I was sent off to Brussels to represent my government in international telecoms negotiations. Every month there were international meetings, always on a Monday or Friday so we could spend a weekend in a nice European capital if we wanted. The hotels were nice, the food was good; I decided that I really liked travel.

I liked my job too, not the politics so much but the math. It was fun designing telecommunications policy for my country.”

3. Life lesson number three: Be willing to take job risks

At this point, everyone else at the table had stopped talking. All faces had turned to Ben, all ears focused on his story.

“I was a telecoms regulator for 10 years during the pioneer period when we were setting up the new infrastructure. That was exciting. Then the work became more routine and the bureaucracy became more obstructionist. I got tired of fighting government battles that served no purpose.

I didn't have a family of my own and by now I had saved a fair amount of money. So I decided to quit my job and travel around the world for a year. I wasn't yet 40 and wanted some perspective to help me decide what to do next.

4. Life lesson number four: when you have achieved immediate goals, look for new challenges

I already knew that I loved working with math. It came to me in Africa that another thing I really enjoyed was working with teenagers ages 12–15. The younger ones no, because it was like babysitting, and the older ones were more about their hormones than their studies. But the young teenagers were open to learning, including learning about math, and I loved teaching math. So I decided to become a math teacher when the year was over. It's hard to be bored in teaching because you have new students every year.

It's easy for a male math teacher to find a job in the UK. Very few men want to teach and very few women want to teach math. I found a job in the Midlands. A year later I met and wound up marrying a woman who works as an education administrator in my district. She understands my profession because she used to be a teacher, and I understand hers because of my experience with government bureaucracy.”

5. Life lesson number five: follow your passion and unexpected passion may find you

When our lunch break ended, every single person at the table was eager to chat with Ben. He was surrounded by them as we rose to return to the conference. That morning he had been almost invisible; now he was the man of the hour. He was unfazed by this rush of attention; he is too well-grounded in WHO he is and WHAT he wants to be. Which is perhaps the most important and most difficult life lesson of all.

[1] Ben is not his real name, and a few irrelevant details have been changed to protect his privacy.

