

Advice is Not a Marching Order

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

The other day I heard someone spluttering in anger over advice given that the receiver had not taken. So, I thought, that wrong idea remains alive and kicking.

I was 28 years old dating an older man whose opinion I respected. I was doing well in my career but wanted to get my college degree. Leaving high school, I hadn't thought I was smart enough, but since then had seen plenty of dumb people with that door-opening certificate.

What did my wise boyfriend think?

"That's a dumb idea," he said. "You're successful where you are, it'll cost a lot of money, you'll put your career on hold, you'll lose time."

I agonized over my decision. Everything he said was right. But ... but ... but ... at the end of the day, what kept popping in front of those reasonable arguments, was, "I want to. I don't know why. It just feels like the right thing to do." I signed up for the fall semester.

My boyfriend spluttered in anger. "Why," he demanded, "did you ask me for advice if you never intended to take it?"

I slunk away, feeling bad for ignoring his sage counsel, but "I want to" still whispered within, and off I went to school, then to a new career, to more school and another career. I love school.

About four years after my slinking, I had a response to his spluttering. It took awhile for that to percolate. I should have said, "I appreciate your advice and the 20 seconds it took for you to give it. But my life is my responsibility. You can walk away from your advice, but have I have to live with my decision and its consequences. I asked you for advice, not marching orders."

When you seek advice, you mostly know what your options are. Each has advantages and disadvantages. You ask others because you want insight, pros and cons, a new perspective, maybe the benefits of another's perspective. But the true purpose of advice is to recognize what you don't want and to decide what you do.

I will often take an advice-seeker down the imaginary path of two potential decisions. They inevitably come to a place where a "doink!" realization occurs. "I don't want that!" they say, and the other path gets chosen.

In my case (though I didn't know it till later), I was done with where I was. I'd achieved what I thought I could, nothing around looked interesting. I didn't want to settle — I'd get bored. School on the other hand, held mystery, possibility, opportunity. I had no idea

what lay at its end, but the journey looked promising, and I was confident that something better was in store for me. I was right. School was no means a hop and skip into the arms of Corporate America where I ultimately landed, but I'd have been nowhere had I timidly bowed to the wisdom of the older person and stayed where I was.

So, ask advice — it's worth it to hear yourself argue opposing rationales, to hear another's perspective, but never turn over the responsibility for your life's decision to someone else. Make it — stamp your name in gold letters on it — and stride forward holding your decision aloft. If you give it thought, consider the angles, ask advice and make your own decisions, you'll look back years later — as I have — and realize you couldn't have gone any other way.