

important reason, but it's an external issue. The compelling reason to move ahead comes from my inside. I need to renew my faith in myself; tackling this problem will help me do just that.

She remembered some lines from the tape: "I don't believe that companies are necessarily prisons, but sometimes we make prisons of them by the way we choose to work there. I have created a prison and the walls are my own lack of faith in myself."

The prison metaphor had a familiar ring—she was sure she had encountered it before in a seminar she had attended. As soon as she arrived at the daycare, she parked her car, took out her journal, and wrote:

Life is too precious to spend any time at all, much less half of my waking hours, in a toxic energy dump. I don't want to live like that, and I am sure my associates will feel the same way once they have a recognizable choice.

The culture in my department has been the way it is for a long time. In order to change the culture, I will need to take personal risks with no assurance of

success. This could be a blessing. Recent events have shaken my faith in myself and taking the necessary risks could help me renew my faith. The fact is that the risk of doing nothing is probably greater than the risk of acting.

Somewhere in my files is material which contains a message that could be timely. I need to find that message because I need all the help I can get.

With that she got out of the car and went in to pick up her daughter.

"Mommy, Mommy. Your eyes are wet. Have you been crying? What's wrong, Mommy?"

"Yes, sweetheart, I've been crying, but it was good crying. How was your day?"

"I made a picture of our family, do you want to see it?"

"I sure do." She looked down and saw the four figures her daughter had drawn, looking back at her. "Oh boy," she exhaled. *Another test of faith.*

"Get your things honey; we have to go pick up Brad."

Sunday Afternoon

Sunday afternoon was Mom's time. Mary Jane arranged to have a sitter for at least two hours every Sunday. It was a little reward she gave herself, one which always left her refreshed and ready for the challenges of work and family. She used the time to read inspirational material or a good novel, go for a bike ride, or just sip coffee and relax. Seattle was full of coffee shops and there was a great spot three blocks away. She grabbed some books and headed out. Her favorite table in a private corner of the shop was waiting for her.

"Grande skinny latte please." She sat down with her latte and decided to start with some inspirational reading. She pulled out her tattered copy of Sarah Ban Breathnach's *Simple Abundance*, a book which contains a reading for every day of the year, and turned to February 8. Key words seemed to jump off the page:

Most of us are uncomfortable thinking of ourselves as artists . . . But each of us is an artist . . . With every *choice*, every day, you are *creating* a unique work of art. Something that only you can do . . . The reason you were born was to leave your own indelible mark on the world.

This is your *authenticity* . . . *Respect* your creative urges . . . step out in *faith* . . . you will discover your *choices* are as authentic as you are. What is more, you will discover that your life is all it was meant to be: a joyous sonnet of thanksgiving.

She had planned on thinking a little bit about work, and the words about choice and faith took her back to the fish market. *Those guys are artists*, she thought, *and they must choose to create each day*. And she had a startling thought: *I can be an artist, too*.

Then, she took out a file from a leadership seminar she had attended. This was where she first heard prison being used as a metaphor for work. Inside was a faded photocopy of a speech written by John Gardner. She recalled that Gardner encouraged people to reproduce his papers, a generous gesture, she thought. *He must have said something powerful if I remember him after all this time*. She searched through the speech, page by page.

The Writing of John Gardner

The passage began:

There is the puzzle of why some men and women go to seed, while others remain vital to the very end of their days. Going to seed may be too vague an expression. Perhaps I should say that many people, somewhere along the line, stop learning and growing.

Mary Jane looked up as she thought, *That fits my group. And it fits the old me, as well.* She smiled at the decision implied by "the old me." She went back to the passage:

One must be compassionate in assessing the reasons. Perhaps life just presented them with tougher problems than they could solve. Perhaps something inflicted a major wound to their self-confidence or their self-esteem . . . Or maybe they just ran so hard for so long that they forgot what they were running for.

I'm talking about people who, no matter

how busy they may seem, have stopped learning and growing. I don't deride that. Life is hard. Sometimes just to keep on keeping on is an act of courage . . .

We have to face the fact that most men and women out there in the world of work are more stale than they know, more bored than they would care to admit . . .

A famous French writer said, "There are people whose clocks stop at a certain point in their lives." I've watched a lot of people move through life. As Yogi Berra says, "You can observe a lot by watching." *I am convinced that most people enjoy learning and growing, at any time in their life.* If we are aware of the danger of going to seed we can take countervailing measures. If your clock is unwound you can wind it up again.

There is something I know about you that you may not even know about yourself. You have within you more resources of energy than have ever been tapped, more talent than has ever been exploited, more strength than has ever been tested, and more to give than you have ever given.

No wonder I remember John Gardner. I have a lot of clocks to wind up, but first I need to wind up my own, she thought.

For the next hour Mary Jane wrote in her journal and was pleased to note that she had become quite peaceful. As she prepared to return home, she looked over what she had written and circled the section that would be her guide on Monday morning.

Solving the problem of the toxic energy dump will require me to become a leader in every sense of the word. I will need to risk the possibility of failure. There is no safe harbor. But to take no action is to fail for sure. I might as well get started. My first step is to choose my attitude. I choose confidence, trust, and faith. I will wind up my clock and get ready to enjoy learning and growing as I work to apply the lessons from the fish market to my toxic energy dump.

Monday Morning

At 5:30 A.M. she felt some pang of guilt as she sat outside her daughter's daycare center, waiting for the doors to open. On rare days like this, Brad would also stay at the daycare until a bus took him to school. She looked over at the sleepy-eyed kids and said, "I won't get you out of bed so early very often kids, but today I need to get to the office to prepare for a really important project."

Brad rubbed his eyes and said, "That's all right, Mom." Then Stacy piped up, "Yeah, it's fun to get here first. We get first pick of video games!"

When the doors opened, Mary Jane signed them in and gave them each a big hug. When she looked back they were already busy.

It was an easy commute; by 5:55, she was at her desk with a steaming cup of coffee and a pad. She took out a pen and wrote in large letters:

CHOOSE YOUR ATTITUDE

Steps:

- Call a meeting and speak from the heart.
- Find a message that communicates the notion of choosing your attitude in a way that everyone will understand and personalize.
- Provide motivation.
- Persist with faith.

Now the tough part. What do I say to my staff here on three? And she began writing down her thoughts.

On Monday mornings the staff met in two shifts; one group covered the phones while the other met with her in the conference room—then they switched. As the first group assembled, she listened to the discussions of family activity and the universal complaints about Monday morning. *These are good people, she thought; she felt her heart beating faster as they quieted and turned their attention to her. Here goes everything.*

Mary Jane's Presentation

"Today we have a serious issue to discuss. A couple of weeks ago the group vice president went to a conference and returned convinced that First Guarantee needs to become a place that is more energetic and enthusiastic. He is convinced that energy and enthusiasm are the keys to productivity, successful recruitment, long-term retention, great customer service, and a host of other qualities that we need in order to compete in our changing and consolidating business. He called a meeting of the leadership group—and at that meeting he referred to the third floor as a 'toxic energy dump.' That's right, he called our floor a toxic energy dump and said it needed to be cleaned."

Mary Jane looked at the startled expressions. A comment came quickly from Adam, a long-term employee: "I'd like to see them do this work. It's the most boring work on earth."

Then one of the least energetic employees said, "What difference does it make if there is energy here? We get the work done, don't we?"

No one challenged the accusation that their energy was toxic.

Mary Jane continued, "I want you to know that this issue is not going away. Oh, the group VP may lose interest, and Bill might forget about it with time, but I will not. You see, I am in full agreement. We are a toxic energy dump. Other parts of the company hate dealing with us. They also call us 'the pit.' They joke about us at lunch. They laugh about us in the halls. And they are right. Heck, many of us hate coming here, and even we call this a pit. I think we can and should change that; I want you to know why."

The startled expressions were now replaced with truly stunned expressions. The silence was complete.

"You all know my story. How Dan and I came to town with our hopes, dreams, and two small children. How Dan's sudden death left me alone. How Dan's insurance didn't cover many of the big expenses. How I found myself in a difficult financial position.

"What you may not know is how all this affected me. Some of you are single moms and dads and know what I am talking about. I needed this job, and I had lost my confidence. I went with the flow, never doing anything that could threaten my security. It seems funny that my security is now threatened and it may be because I went with the flow. Well, those days are over.

"Here is the bottom line. I still need this job, but I don't want to spend the rest of my working life in a toxic energy dump. Dan's lesson had been lost on me until now. *Life is too precious just to be passing through to retirement.* We simply spend too much time at work to allow it to be wasted. I think we can make this a better place to work.

"Now the good news. I know a consultant who works for a world famous organization and is an expert on energy. You will meet him eventually. Today I am going to convey his first bit of advice: *We choose our attitude.*"

Mary Jane continued by discussing the concept of choosing your attitude. Then she asked if there were any questions.

Steve raised his hand. When Mary Jane nodded to him, he said, "Suppose I'm driving my car and some idiot cuts me off in traffic. That causes me to get upset and I may honk or even make a gesture, if you know what I mean. What's with the choice thing? I didn't do it; it was done to me. I didn't have a choice."

"Let me ask you something, Steve. If you were in a tough part of town, would you have used that gesture?"

Steve smiled. "No way! You can get hurt doing that."

"So you can choose your response in a tough part of town, but you have no choice in the suburbs?"

"OK, Mary Jane. OK, I get it."

"You couldn't have asked a better question, Steve. We can't control the way other people drive, but we can choose how we respond. Here at First Guarantee we don't have a lot to do with selecting the work that needs to be done, but we can choose how we approach that work. I want all of you to think of ways this is true and see if you can identify things we can do to remind ourselves of our choices. Good luck. Our work life depends on it."

The second staff meeting was much like the first. When she didn't get any questions, she used Steve's question from the first group. It was 10:30 on Monday morning. She was drained from the meetings, but realized it was her first opportunity to choose her attitude. And she did.

The week sped by. She made a point of walking around the office each day and being available to talk about the idea of choosing your attitude. When she saw Steve, he said, "Boy, you really nailed me at the staff meeting."

"I hope I didn't embarrass you."

"Mary Jane, you did me a big favor. My life has been a series of reactions lately. You reminded me that I have important choices to make and that I can make them if I have a little self-control and courage."

"Courage?"

"I am in a bad relationship; I need to do something about it. I can see now that reacting and feeling like a victim is not going to solve the problem. The problem needs to be confronted. I'm sorry to be so evasive, but it is rather personal."

"Good luck, Steve, and thanks for trusting me with your story."

"Oh, we all trust you, Mary Jane. It's just that this work is so boring and all we hear are complaints. We feel like we're always under attack. Keep at it; I'm behind you all the way."

She was pleasantly surprised by the many words of encouragement. While staff members were not sure about the details, most liked the idea of creating a more satisfying work environment.

Then on Friday it happened. She walked off the elevator on the third floor and was confronted with a giant poster. On the top it said: **CHOOSE YOUR ATTITUDE**, and

in the middle were the words: MENU CHOICES FOR THE DAY. Down below the menu were two drawings. One was a smiling face and the other was a frowning face. She was ecstatic. *They do get it!* she thought to herself and raced to her office to call Lonnie.

After telling him about the menu, she suggested they finish their discussion. Lonnie asked about lunch Monday. Mary Jane said she really didn't want to wait until next week, so they agreed she should come to the market on Saturday and bring the kids with her.

Saturday at the Fish Market

Saturdays are always busy at the market; Lonnie suggested they come early. Mary Jane foolishly asked what the earliest time was they might arrive. Lonnie said he started work at 5 A.M. They settled on 8.

Brad and Stacy got in the car drowsy, but by the time they had all made the trip into Seattle and found a parking spot, her kids were wired and ready for action. The questions were unending. "Where do they get the fish? Are they big fish? Do they have any sharks? Will there be any other kids there?"

As the three walked down Pike Place to the market, Mary Jane was struck by how quiet and calm it was. She immediately spotted Lonnie standing by the fish display. She was impressed with how neatly organized the stand was, with the fish and seafood packed in ice and signs detailing names, prices, and special qualities. One section was empty except for the ice.

"Good morning," said Lonnie with his customary smile. "And who are these two fishmongers?"

Mary Jane introduced her children. Lonnie welcomed them and said it was time to get to work. As she was removing her notepad from her purse, he stopped her and said, "No, not that kind of work. I thought you three could help me finish this display."

"Cool," said Brad.

"I couldn't find any boots your size, but I did find three aprons to wear. Here, put these on and we'll start packing fish."

Stacy looked a little bewildered; Mary Jane gave her a quick hug. Lonnie took Brad into the back of the store to visit the fish locker, while Mary Jane kept Stacy entertained with a walk among the displays. In about fifteen minutes, Lonnie and Brad returned pushing a mammoth cart full of fish. To be exact, Lonnie was

pushing the cart—Brad was hanging on to the handle with his feet just touching the ground.

PLAY

“Mom! Wow! It rocks back there! There must be a million fish. Isn’t that right, Lonnie? I got to help, too!” Lonnie gave him a big smile and a nod, but pretended to be all business. “We have to pack these fish so the market can open, little buddy. Ready to give me a hand?”

Brad was having a ball. He would help Lonnie pick up a tuna and Lonnie would pack it in ice, adding to a neat row of fish. The tuna were almost as big as Brad, and Mary Jane was sorry she didn’t bring her camera. The way Lonnie worked with Brad was magic. Once in a while Lonnie would trick Brad, pretend the fish bit him, or do something that caused Brad to laugh. When there was room for only two more tuna in the row, Lonnie turned the job over to Brad, but provided some subtle help lifting. If Brad were asked to pick his “action hero” at that moment, he would have chosen Lonnie.

“Now it’s time for your mom to get to work. Take out that notebook, Mary Jane, and Brad will give you the second ingredient of an energy-filled workplace.”

“Brad?”
 “You bet. The second ingredient selected by a bunch of fishmongers who choose their attitude is something that is familiar to any kid. We just forget its importance as we become older and more serious. Brad, tell your mom what you do at recess.”

Brad looked over the top of the tuna that was pinning him to the edge of the counter and said, “Play.” Mary Jane opened her journal and made a new note: **PLAY!** Her mind flashed back to the scene at the market she witnessed on that first day. She had been looking at a playground with adult kids at recess. Throwing fish, kidding with each other and the customers, calling out orders, repeating the calls. The place had been electric.

“Don’t misunderstand,” said Lonnie. “This is a real business which is run to make a profit. This business pays a lot of salaries, and we take the business seriously, but we discovered we could be serious about business and still have fun with the way we conducted business. You know, not get all uptight, but let things flow. What many of our customers think of as entertainment is just a bunch of adult kids having a good time, but doing it in a respectful manner.”

"And the benefits are many. We sell a lot of fish. We have low turnover. We enjoy work that *can* be very tedious. We have become great friends, like the players on a winning team. We have a lot of pride in what we do and the way we do it. And we have become world famous. All from doing something which Brad does without much thought. We know how to play!"

Brad said, "Hey, Mom, why don't you bring the people at work to Lonnie so he can teach them how to play?"

MAKE THEIR DAY

Suddenly someone addressed Mary Jane from the side. "Hey, reporter lady, want to buy a fish?" One of Lonnie's associates had come over and was holding a huge fish head in his hand. "I'll give you a great deal on this one. It's missing a few parts but the price is right." He made the fish's mouth into a smile and said, "I call it smiling sushi. Just a penny." And he looked at her with a crazy, crooked smile.

Lonnie was laughing and, of course, Brad wanted to hold it. Stacy was hiding behind Mom's legs. Mary

Jane took out a penny and gave it to the fish guy they called "Wolf." She didn't need to ask why they called him Wolf. His hair was unruly and his eyes tracked everything as if it were prey. This wolf was clearly domesticated, however, and if such a thing were possible, Wolf had a grandfatherly air about him. Wolf put the smiling sushi in a bag and gave it to Brad, who was beaming. Shy Stacy piped up for the first time that morning and said she wanted one, too. Wolf brought over two more. Now they all had a smiling sushi.

Lonnie said, "Thanks, Wolf. You just showed us the third ingredient in creating a high-energy, world famous market."

"He did?"

"Think back to the first two times you were here, Mary Jane. What stands out in your mind?"

"I remember a young redheaded woman, about twenty years old. She got up on the platform and tried to catch a fish. Of course she found them a little slippery and missed twice. But she had a ball."

"Why was that so memorable?"

"She was so animated, so alive. And the rest of us in the crowd identified with her. We could imagine ourselves in her place."