

Lessons left by Eugene O'Kelly

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EUGENE O'Kelly was chief executive officer (CEO) and chairman of KPMG in the US.

At 53, he led a hectic life – "relentless" as he described it – full of pressure, with a calendar "perpetually extended out over the next 18 months". He was always "moving at 100 miles an hour". He "worked all the time", late into many nights and missed virtually every school event for his younger daughter.

He travelled on average 150,000 miles each year. He rarely took proper vacations. But he had plans for retirement in Arizona and other personal dreams and goals for the years ahead when time allowed. He "sat atop the world".

Out of the blue, in May 2005, he was diagnosed with an incurable brain tumour. He was told that he had three months to live. Just like that. All his plans as CEO were "shattered". Soon, however, he was able to say that he had been "blessed" and that the diagnosis was "a gift". In a remarkable and poignant book entitled *Chasing Daylight* (published by McGraw Hill), O'Kelly tells how he found a deeper understanding of what was important in life and of his refocusing of priorities, his acceptance of being unable to control everything and letting go, and his quest to "beautifully resolve" his personal relationships.

O'Kelly asks why it is so scary to ask ourselves the simple question: "Why am I doing what I am doing?"

He understands the vortex, the treadmill and the intoxication of "success", of feeling relevant, of being unable to stop. But he challenges us to look again at what we do and why. Reflecting on his previous relentless office schedule, he reveals that he wishes he'd "known then how to be and stay in the present, the way I now knew it".

The book deserves to be read in full to appreciate its richness. But I suppose the invitation to many of us as we start a new year is to take seriously the gift that O'Kelly has left us (he died in September 2005). To reflect upon what our work styles, commitments and relationships actually mean. To consider their impact on ourselves – and on others. And to do so without the stimulus of a terminal diagnosis.

"What are we doing?" "Why?" "How might it be different?" "What really matters?" "Why?" "What do we really want to do?" "What would we need to do to change things – if we want to?"

Recently, I worked with the partners in a family business to address some deep-seated issues that had a serious impact on its operation. The effect on relationships had also been profound and the hurt and anger were real, between and within the generations. In such situations, it helps to ask what really matters, how things might be different and what needs to be done to change things. What made all the difference was something that had perhaps not happened for years: acknowledgement of each other's contributions, thanks expressed for hard work, acceptance that each was trying his or her best in the circumstances, reassurance about real intentions. Breaking the mould – or habit

s – is not easy, but it can be done.

Moves by senior counsel – such as Colin Boyd and Mike Jones – from the Bar to leading solicitor firms show that radical changes of path are possible even at senior levels. So, what might we do? Leave the office a few minutes earlier? Take on one piece of work less? Move to a different job? Improve our present situation? Say thank you to someone? Plan that special trip – and take it?

Each of us will have our own response, according to our own needs and circumstances.

If this piece started on a downbeat note, let's finish by reminding ourselves that real change comes when we are courageous and hopeful.

If O'Kelly's book gives us reason to be brave, Barack Obama's inspiring *The Audacity of Hope* (Crown Publishers) tells us why voters in the US are taking to a man who offers real optimism. And, remember, Obama once practised as a lawyer...