

What Will Be Your Body of Work?

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RECENTLY, I RECEIVED a prospective call from the daughter of a gentleman I served some 33 years ago. Her parents having now died, she and her sister are looking for an adviser, and had always remembered their father spoke gratefully of me. I was working for a savings and loan at the time, and the gentleman was so pleased with my work, he wrote two letters of recognition and appreciation: one to the bank president and the other to the human resources director of benefits of the company where he had recently retired. Both letters ended up in my employment file, and my boss shared copies of the letters with me.

When I started my financial planning career, I began to keep what I call a “Feel Good” file. I would save each unsolicited letter from clients expressing appreciation for my efforts on their behalf. I found that this collection of notes, cards, and letters provided me a reminder of the intrinsic value and meaning of this sacred service and profession I had chosen following the unexpected death of my father. In retrospect, these files provide a way to measure and value the meaning-making created by

the financial planning process.

I found this file provided me solace when I had difficulties with particularly challenging clients. Some of these difficult client experiences, at the time, I would call failures, and in a sense, they were. Looking back, sometimes the challenges had less to do with me and more to do with a misalignment of expectations. Others were a direct result of my inexperience and lack of advanced planning and advisory skills. This is a compelling reason to ensure client and planner are a good fit. Either way, failing never felt good, even when framing it as a learning opportunity. The “feel good files” always lifted my spirits and reminded me of what inspired me in the first place to become a CFP® professional.

The call from my former client’s daughter got me thinking of my body of work. Writers, musicians, academics, presidents, actors, architects, and many other professions all have a body of work. Pre-retirees and retirees alike will tell their planner that they do not want to run out of money before they run out of life. This is a true definition of a successful financial plan and an important part of a body of work. On this count, after 35 years in this profession, I have had several successful plans. We are now working with and for the children or siblings of former clients who’ve inherited monies. The client’s money lasted longer than they did. Success!

As a CFP® professional focused on providing

financial life planning, my body of work extends well beyond the cards and letters and exists in motion as our firm serves over 200 clients across the country. It shows up in the estate plans we help clients complete, college graduations, weddings, and births of children, grandchildren, and even great grandchildren. It shows up in the insurance we help clients acquire and the benefits paid. It shows up in their facial expressions of relief and peace of mind knowing their financial security and lives are in order. It shows up in the pictures they share of trips experienced and celebrations of life memorials.

“How do you measure your success, and what is it that keeps you doing what you do?”

How many clients have you helped collect life insurance death benefits, long-term care, or disability income benefits that saved the client or client's spouse from living a life of quiet financial desperation? How many clients have you guided during the market turmoil with decisions to either hold or take advantage? How many families have benefited from your tax loss harvesting and rebalancing to keep the clients' portfolios and plans on track? For retirees, how much more do they receive from monthly retirement checks and maximized Social Security benefits? How many bucket-list items can clients check off given your wise counsel?

Collectively, our bodies of work show up in the body of knowledge through research, articles published in the *Journal of Financial Planning*, and quotes in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and local newscasts. It also shows up in books written both for the public and for the practitioner. The true scope of a financial planner's body of work is larger and more profound than we give credit.

What Is or Will Be Your Body of Work?

Why did you choose this profession? Do you measure your body of work by your new client closing ratio, your AUM, your annual income, your designations and licenses? Or, how large you have grown your firm? Do you have a “feel good file”? How do you measure your success, and what is it that keeps you doing what you do? At the end of your career, or at your sudden death or disability, what will you leave behind as your legacy or body of work?

Viktor Frankl states in *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning* (2000) that “man is actually a being who is reaching out for meanings to fulfill and other human beings to encounter” and that “happiness is the side effect of living out the self-transcendence of existence.” He defined self-transcendence as the point at which the individual is committed to someone or something greater than the self and when one has served or is involved in loving another human being, happiness occurs by itself.

As financial planning professionals, we have daily opportunities to reach out to human beings to encounter and meanings to fulfill, to transcend ourselves, and to experience the side effects of happiness and gratitude because we chose to commit our care, skill, and judgment in service to our client's journey toward their ideal selves. I propose this is the ultimate reward of building your body of work. ■