

The Greek Parthenon and Your Career

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the most important lessons for our lives and careers comes from the Parthenon in Greece. The Parthenon has been standing in the same location for almost 2,500 years and is considered one of the world's great cultural monuments. It is largely because of the Parthenon's multiple columns that the Parthenon has survived for so long. If you understand and employ the lessons of the Parthenon, you should never have any issues with feeling secure in your career and life.

I personally have run my career according to what I call the Parthenon Principle (the "Principle"). I define the Principle as the following:

Your career needs to be supported by multiple pillars. The more pillars that support your career, the better. If you are in a situation wherein you are supported by just one pillar or just a few, you are in danger and need to make sure you get more pillars.

I left a job as an asphalt contractor to be an attorney due to the Principle. I left the first [law firm](#) I worked for due to the Principle, and I left the second law firm due to this Principle. I run my career right now due to the Principle. The Principle is something that can guide your life and enrich your career as well, and it is something you should always be aware of. The more you understand and employ the Principle, the better off you will be. Here are some of the rewards for understanding and guiding your career under the Principle:

- If you lose your job, you do not care for the most part.
- If you do not get an important job, you do not care for the most part.
- If a business you are involved in fails, you do not care for the most part.
- If something happens in one part of your career, you do not care.

The rewards gained from understanding the Principle are profound. Over the past year, for example, I have seen incredible reversals of fortune in two businesses I operate--a [student loan](#) business and a [recruiting business](#). The financial losses from these have been millions of dollars a month. While the loss of jobs and business from this has been painful, other businesses have picked up the slack, and I have been largely unaffected. I feel as secure today as I felt before this turn of events. I feel this way because I am running my career according to the Principle. The scariest and worst thing I believe I could do for myself would be to support my companies on one pillar alone. At all points in time, I have multiple businesses running, and this enables me to feel secure. In fact, I would say I feel more secure than the [CEOs](#) of most Fortune 500 companies because I have tried to create a Parthenon with my own career. You should do the same.

The Parthenon represents the fact that we cannot just do things in one way in any pursuit, and rely upon that one way of doing things. We cannot be dependent upon any single method of support in our careers. If we are to rely upon one way of doing things, then we are taking a massive gamble. A career and life needs to be supported in multiple ways and through multiple outlets. Being overly dependent for your income on one data point is extremely dangerous.

For example, about 18 months ago I was in the student loan business, and this was my largest business. Overnight, the value of student loans on Wall Street went almost to zero. The government changed the compensation that student loan lenders could receive. I was almost entirely put out of business overnight. At the time, our company had probably \$20,000,000 in [real estate](#) and other assets dedicated to this business. We had hundreds of employees who were dealing with this business in one form or another. Then overnight everything changed. The business stopped operating, and even the company's real estate holdings lost probably half of their value within the following 12 months.

We pulled through this catastrophe quite easily and without too much difficulty because we were anchored by so many other businesses.

Then something else happened. Our second largest business, a large group of recruiting companies, experienced a dramatic and devastating loss in revenue. The company coughed a bit due to this, but has since pulled through just fine due to even more businesses that we have started. Due to the Principle again, the business ended up being fine because there were so many other companies there to pick up the financial slack. This is how it is with the Principle: Multiple pillars help you survive. This does not just apply to companies. It also applies to you and your career.

About a decade ago, I was sitting in my office in front of a computer and I received an email, and everyone in the office received the same message. In the subject line it said something like "All Personnel: Partnership Class Decisions". At the time, I was in my third year of practicing law and I was very dedicated (at least, I thought) to what I was doing. The *Holy Grail* for young attorneys is to become a partner in a law firm. Attorneys go to college and work and compete very hard to get into the best [law schools](#). Then they go to law school and continue to work and compete very hard. Only the best attorneys from the best schools typically get jobs with the best law firms, and very few of the attorneys who go to work in the best law firms ever end up becoming partner in these "best law firms". The entire process is extremely difficult. Once an attorney is inside one of these law firms, he or she typically needs to dedicate himself or herself to the work with a great passion, in order to succeed. It is not uncommon for these attorneys to work 3,000 hours a year for many years in order to become partners.

When this email came into my inbox, you could hear the entire office go silent as everyone started reading it. Although the subject line of the email mentioned "All Personnel", the more I read the email, the more I realized that this email was not something I should have been reading. It should have been addressed to "All Partners". Someone had made a terrible mistake. While I am reconstructing this from memory, I remember that the email contained statements such as the following:

Jack will not quit if we do not make him partner this year. We have decided to string him along until next year at which point we will make him partner. He is clearly material to be a partner in our firm right now but we will delay making him a partner

yet one more year.

Cindy is someone who is not partner material in our firm. Nevertheless, the decision has been made that until she quits, or otherwise leaves, we will let her know that she should "keep trying," and in the outside chance that she does leave, she is easily replaceable.

The email then listed various individuals who would be made partner that year, and a smattering of people who would not make partner and would be asked to leave the firm. I could not believe what I was reading. A few minutes later, all of the computers in the building were turned off by some sort of remote switch. Someone had made a terrible mistake by sending out this particular email to everybody. Incredibly, a couple of days later, the head of the law firm sent an email to everyone implying they had fired the head of human resources for sending this email.

There was someone in our office in Los Angeles that I referred to as "Jack" in the quote above. He was one of the more solid and good guys I had ever known, and I liked him a great deal. He had been working in the law firm for over a decade and was then in his fourteenth year of practice or so. It is rare for someone to be an "associate" and not a "partner" for fourteen years and not leave the law firm or decide to do something else altogether, but Jack was someone who was solid and really stuck things out. I remember walking by his office the day the email had gone out, and he had a noticeable perk to him that was absent before. I think he was on the phone with his wife and telling her about what had just happened.

Over the next year, an incredible number of changes occurred within the law firm. The most important change was that the power structure within the law firm was reorganized. An important partner from another law firm, whom I'll call "Robert", had come over and assumed leadership of the office. Under Robert's leadership, the firm was eliminating many of the attorneys who had been there before his arrival, and Robert also ensured that many of the attorneys he had brought with him were placed into the partnership ranks.

The next year when partnership decisions were handed out, Robert made partner a few young associates he had brought with him from the other firm, but not Jack. The day after Jack learned that he had not been made partner, he reported to work as usual and was in his office that morning. Robert came into his office and asked Jack to do a very simple assignment that an attorney with six months of experience should have been doing--not someone with 15+ years of experience. Jack responded with some hostility. From what I heard, Jack said something like the following:

"You know, I am a little upset right now because I have been working here over a decade and believed I was going to be made a partner in this law firm yesterday. I am not sure why you are demeaning me by giving me this work right now. I am pretty upset right now, and would rather not deal with you while I am upset."

Robert apparently looked at him for around 10 seconds and said "okay" and then walked away. Less than 30 minutes later, Robert walked into Jack's office and said something along the lines of the following:

"I have two pieces of paper here. One is a check for \$30,000. The other is a severance agreement for you to sign that says you will not sue us. If you sign the severance agreement you can have the check. If you do not want to sign the agreement you cannot have the check, and you are fired. Either way, I want you to be out of the office within the next 15 minutes and never come back."

Robert may very well have had good reasons for doing this to Jack, but the episode was quite alarming for me to hear. It was astonishing to me how a 10+ year career could just come to a screeching halt like this. The good news is that Jack was able to [find another job](#) eventually, and everything ended up being okay. However, I have seen similar things happen to scores of other attorneys, and it does not always turn out *okay*. Many of those people did not find other jobs for a long, long time.

What is the lesson of this? Under the Principle, you need to have many options available to you at any given time, and it is dangerous to put all of your eggs in one basket. Here, Jack was entirely dependent upon the whim of one law firm and their decisions about what happened to him. He also did not have numerous clients at the time. If he had had numerous clients and were he not as dependent upon the law firm for most of his work, he would have had better leverage. He could have left the law firm and easily made money with those clients. However, Jack did not have any of these things, and it held him back.

The Principle demands that you give yourself multiple methods of support in your career. If you want to be a lawyer, that is fine; however, you better be sure that your career is not entirely dependent upon the whims of one person. You need to have clients or a skill so profound that you can help dictate the terms of your career. The more you support yourself with multiple methods of doing things, the better off you will be.

This is why the Parthenon survives to this day. Its weight is supported in multiple ways, by so many pillars.

The Greeks built the Parthenon to celebrate their victory over the Persians, and it was completed in 432 B.C.

Over the course of the next 1,000 years, this building was a temple to the Goddess Athena.

- Sometime in the Sixth Century, the Parthenon was converted to a Christian church.
- In 1456, after Athens fell to the Ottomans, the Parthenon was converted into a mosque. The Ottomans added a minaret to the Parthenon; however, the building was not further modified.
- In 1687, the Venetians attacked Athens and the Ottomans used the Parthenon to store gun powder. The Parthenon was hit with a shell and the gun powder exploded destroying much of the building. But the Parthenon still survived and is still standing today.

The Parthenon is now a massive tourist destination. The building just keeps providing value no matter what age it is, and it is all due to those columns. If there were not so many columns, it would not still be standing. You too need to provide value and run your career in such a way that you are always providing value.

Although I am an [attorney](#), I originally did not want to go to law school and become an attorney. Instead, my dream was to be an asphalt contractor. The problem with me being an asphalt contractor, though, was that my skin was not very good at being out in the sun, and specifically, on asphalt in the sun. As an asphalt contractor you need to work on black pavement all day around smoking hot asphalt. The black asphalt really absorbs the sun and it is not the equivalent of being out on a sports field, for example. It is much worse. I would get so sunburned being outdoors that several times a summer I would literally physically have to peel a layer of my skin off that had become very burned. My face was constantly coated with zincs and all sorts of lotions to keep the sun out as much as possible. Being outdoors on hot asphalt was not something I believed my body could handle over the long term.

"You would do fine being an asphalt contractor," I remember a relative saying to me one day. "But your body probably would not, and you could not last doing this."

So I decided to practice law instead, where I could work mainly indoors. You need to choose what you are doing and your career based on the idea that you can keep doing it forever, and will not be stopped. You do not want to be stopped by the sun, by one person who does not like you, or anything for that matter. You need to run your career in such a way that you are supported like the Parthenon and can adapt to all climates.

One of the interesting characteristics of the Parthenon and its columns is that they were designed to be thicker at their bases than they are at the top. Architecturally this was done so that they would appear taller when standing at the base of the Parthenon. This creates an optical illusion for people visiting the Parthenon and portrays more strength and height than really exists. In your career and life, you need to be supported with a strong foundation and always need to be portraying strength. The less weaknesses you have, the better.

Although it occurred a long time ago, most Americans remember the controversy surrounding Tanya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan in the 1994 US Figure Skating Championship in Detroit. Here, acquaintances of Harding struck Kerrigan on the knee after a practice. Both skaters became almost overnight celebrities due to this particular incident. In my mind, what makes this so interesting is that it highlights the incredible vulnerability that many people have in their careers. The idea that a career could be taken down by a blow to the knee is a dangerous lesson. In our careers, it is extremely important that we are not just dependent upon a knee, or one potential outlet. We need multiple outlets in order to succeed.

One of the saddest things that I regularly read about is the careers of child stars who end up not succeeding later in life. I have heard about some becoming robbers and having similar problems after having had incredibly successful careers when they were younger. There are also stories of young stars who have ended up having great careers when they are older, but these stories seem less common. The idea that I am trying to stress is this: *if you do not have other options in your career and job search, then you are making a horrible decision*. Your career needs to be supported with multiple pillars because the idea of long-term security should factor into how you run your career.

My first [legal job](#) was with a law firm and group of people whom I really liked. However, the longer I was at the law firm, the more I realized that I would never be able to run my career from the standpoint of the Principle. The business and clients that came into the law firm came primarily from two or three very powerful partners who earned millions of dollars per year. The other partners in the law firm were partners in the sense they had titles but they really did not have any business for the most part. Consequently, their careers were controlled by those with clients. While my perception may have been off a bit, the idea I got while working in this law firm was that the partners had so much work that they were not really looking for others to bring more clients into their business. Instead, they were most interested in *worker bees* whom they could control. The firm had so much work that the *worker bees* did not have any time to go out and meet people and get business. It was largely due to this reason that I left this firm; I did not see much of a future in it. The primary partners were, at the time, making twenty-five times as much money, in some cases, as the other partners. The idea of continuing to work in a firm wherein I would be so dependent upon a few people above me did not appeal to me.

The challenge of all of our careers is to be supported like the Parthenon on numerous columns and with numerous potential sources of work, should one source fail. You should never allow yourself to be boxed in by being dependent upon just one person, skill or income stream for your success. If you are an attorney, you probably need to have lots of clients. If you are in a company, you need to have lots of allies. If you are good at one thing, you need to make sure that you have other skills, in case whatever job you are doing becomes obsolete. You do not want to be vulnerable to any one person, or to the economy.

I left the practice of law and eventually went into recruiting because, for me, this seemed like something that was more in accordance with the Principle.

- First, I felt the profession was safe because recruiting has been around in one form or another for thousands of years.
- Secondly, I knew I could be diversified because I would have several candidates at one time, whom I could work with, and since recruiters get paid if and when a person gets a job, I knew that if one person did not [get a job](#), another person would.
- Third, I knew that since the job required me to find candidates, and my success would be determined based on this skill, I would not be dependent upon another person to give me work.
- Fourth, I knew that I could work with numerous law firms and not just one, and this would give me extra support.
- Fifth, I knew that since I was working with law firms, even if the economy was poor, there would still be business and recruitment opportunities. When one practice area in a law firm is doing poorly during a recession, another is doing well. For example, corporate work may dry up in law firms during a recession but bankruptcy will take off.

This is an example of a career that uses the Parthenon. Eventually, to keep this business going in all economic climates, I started other businesses that supported this business when it slowed down, despite the support it had. Year after year, I have had an enjoyable career that is without a lot of stops and starts, due to my understanding of the Principle.

You too need to use the Principle in your own career. Support your career and life with multiple pillars.

THE LESSON

If you are good at one thing, then you need to make sure you develop a diversity of skills in case demand for your primary skill goes away. You need to shape yourself and your career to withstand all kinds of economic and other climates. Like the Greek Parthenon, you must have a strong foundation and project strength, supporting yourself with multiple pillars.