

DILEMMAS

Stop pleasing others and please yourself instead



SUSAN PINKER PROBLEM SOLVING

Dear Susan,

I am a first-generation Canadian whose parents moved here from Asia after much hardship.

I've always worked hard and done well in school. I was a gold medalist in my law school class and had my choice of the big, national firms as an articling student. I have now worked as a lawyer at one of them for almost six years.

Although I am not a partner, it is likely that I will be offered a partnership soon. My husband is also a lawyer. We have an 18-month-old. My mother takes care of the baby and I love my work, but I am finding it difficult to be away from the baby for 12 to 14 hours a day.

I feel I am missing out and I am having difficulty concentrating on my work. My husband and parents are strongly opposed to me leaving this job. I feel stressed out all the time. Please help.

--Trapped

Dear Trapped,

There's nothing like meeting everyone else's expectations -- but your own. Your parents are happy because you're an immigrant's dream -- your success compensates for their sacrifices. Your husband is happy because he doesn't have to be the sole earner. The baby has a doting grandmother responding to every need. And your employer is happy because they've snagged a bright, hard-working female lawyer, who is a member of a minority to boot.

Now, if only you could clam up about how miserable you are, everything would be perfect.

Your situation reminds me of a friend who met her father for dinner at a nice restaurant. The ambience

was lively and the menu looked great. When the server arrived, her father gave his order, then pointed to my friend and said: "She'll also have the chicken." As her eyebrows almost arched off her face, he added: "The chicken is superb here."

Maybe so, but what if she wanted the fish?

No matter how good the food is where you work, and no matter how much your husband and parents think you should eat it, it's your plate. You should decide what's on it, whether it's full-time work, part-time hours for now or a complete hiatus.

Having done what's expected of you all along, it's hard to imagine you have choices, but you're in the driver's seat. Men and women of your generation (but many more women) are questioning the gruelling hours and lack of control required by building a corporate law career, and there has been a huge exodus of young professionals as a result, according to Catalyst, an organization that tracks women in business.

A 2005 survey of 649 Canadian law associates found that 62 per cent of the women and 47 per cent of the men intended to stay with their firms for five years or less. At an average cost of \$315,000 per associate lost, this adds up to big bucks for law firms, which now invest even more time and money to hang on to their talented recruits. The escapees migrate to other firms or to in-house counsel jobs that they perceive to be more flexible, or where they'll have more control over their time, according to the survey.

Many women who are as conflicted as you are leave law entirely to launch

their own businesses or nurture the home fires for a while. That's not what law firms want. They'd rather women stay, increasing the odds they'll join the management team one day. So you're in a good bargaining position.

At least that's what I surmised when I visited the hushed, glassed-in law offices of Borden Ladner Gervais LLP last week in Montreal and Toronto. Like several law firms and businesses across Canada, they have signed on with a new company called LifeSpeak, a service that provides custom-designed workshops by experts on issues such as parenting conflicts and stress management in an effort to keep stressed-out associates working and talking to each other.

"All my friends are leaving law because they're forced to make a decision between life and work," said Michael Held, 34, one of Toronto-based LifeSpeak's three founding partners, who, ironically, left corporate law himself, as did another partner, Aimée Israel, a mother of three small children (a third partner, Alexis Wise, is a management consultant with an MBA). The three saw the need for companies to support professionals scrambling to keep their personal lives from disintegrating.

One of the workshops I observed featured Dr. Ken Nedd, a stress expert, playing Bobby McFerrin's *Don't Worry, Be Happy*, while bouncing around the boardroom giving easy-to-remember stress-reduction tips. This won't alter your billable hours. Nor will such workshops calm your longing for your baby -- although you may meet other lawyers at the workshop who feel the same. And deploying such relaxation tips now might just prevent a cardiac event "when they'll put you in a hole and throw dirt on your face," the good doctor said. Moreover, such efforts -- even if they're just baby steps -- signalled to me that firms are starting

to take employees' personal needs seriously.

When I asked Sean Weir, Borden's national managing partner, whether bringing in expert speakers across the country was part of a larger plan, he agreed. More than 50 per cent of its new hires are women, but as is true of other law firms, it is hard to hang on to them past three or four years, he said. "We've got to figure out how to keep these young people engaged. They're under tremendous pressures. We have talented people who have pressing needs at the moment. How can we be more flexible and accommodating so we can keep them?"

He said that his management team is now trying to formalize part-time schedules that might slow down, but wouldn't ultimately penalize, women like you on the partnership track. This tells me that your law firm could be ready to make a deal with you about reduced hours, for the next few years, anyway. All you have to do is get up the nerve to tell your family that what you want is important and, this time, you're having the monkfish special.

Dear Susan,

I'm a healthy, young-looking, 61 year-old man with two graduate degrees and a lifetime of varied work experience, from working in a pulp mill to acting and directing in theatre and teaching university English. I've been out of work for a year since my office closed at a major university. Since then, I have

written a book and a screenplay, and worked part-time for a political campaign. I've also applied for teaching positions in theatre and film at 25 colleges and was turned down by all of them. I have not found any writing work, either. I'm becoming concerned about winding up in the streets despite my education and work history. Advice?

--Too Educated for My Own Good

Dear Too Educated,

It may be nervy to suggest that an actor and author lacks imagination, but that's my first impression. Why restrict your search to college teaching and writing at this stage? It's self-defeating to limit yourself to two highly circumscribed activities, especially since, at 61, you're likely facing ageism on top of a restricted job market for college teaching.

Not every employer will take on someone with retirement peeking over the horizon, even if research quoted in the latest *Scientific American* shows that older workers make fewer mistakes and are less easily distracted. But arts, social service and educational organizations may be interested in someone with your background to do outreach and fundraising. There are administrative jobs out there for those familiar with the arts. Business needs literate people. Widen your net.

Your own creative pursuits may have to wait if you are serious about finding paying work. As any

unemployed 30-year-old software engineer will tell you, looking for a job is itself a full-time job. Devote yourself to it if you are really worried about becoming destitute. Exploit every contact, crawl obsessively over every interesting website, make cold calls to the ones that spark your imagination, be prepared to take on contract or part-time work and pound the pavement looking for Now Hiring signs. Serendipity is a wonderful thing, but you have to put yourself where it can find you.

Which leads me back to your vocation as a college teacher and writer. Academics are usually lampooned as hot air balloons by novelists but, in his novel, *Bred in the Bone*, writer, journalist and former University of Toronto academic Robertson Davies put these words into the mouth of one of his characters, the likeable Prof. Simon Darcourt: "What we call luck is the inner man externalized. We make things happen to us."

You may feel a bit tired, but you clearly have some imagination in you. Grit goes a long way, too.

Susan Pinker is a psychologist and writer.
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