

Break Out of the Work Mold and Start Living!

by Lily

So many people have taken the courageous step to walk away from careers that no longer provide them with intrinsic or energetic rewards, literally choosing personal happiness and inner fulfillment over the need for a high paying job that leaves them emotionally bankrupt.

For example, a multi-talented teacher in the New York public school system, whose dedication to her students was compromised by a board of education lacking in integrity, found herself propelled into the healing arts, which was her first love. Similarly, a tech-savvy systems analyst, whose passion for artistic creation was squelched on the job, reached his frustration threshold and turned his innate talents loose on clay and canvas. These are just two illustrations of a growing trend of incredibly bright, creative individuals following their heart and carving out a new career path for themselves, or better said, a new, inspired livelihood and way of being.

Listening to their stories of work transition is not only gratifying, but also deeply familiar and uplifting. Walking away from the stress of keeping up appearances in an emotionally unrewarding career, to feeling truly alive and liberated by doing something you're really good at and love, usually requires a great deal of trust and courage, since the new situation may be on the periphery of social status and high pay – at least initially. But many of us have forsaken our long held careers for the promise of a richer, emotional life and, in so doing, have aligned our day-to-day lives with our life purpose – and never looked back.

If you've considered doing this, or are fortunate enough to have already done it, you know that it's not always easy. In fact, it usually involves a tremendous amount of soul searching and bank book assessment – can I *really* afford to do this? Which almost always triggers the heartfelt reply, how can I afford *not* to?

Taking the leap of faith and launching a new, more creative and freeing career can be as anxiety provoking as it is palpably rewarding. Work no longer feels like work, much less drudgery. And you get paid for it. What a concept! People are quick to compliment your talents and insights, not to mention thanking you for a job well done. “When was the last time I received those kinds of strokes?” we remind ourselves time and again.

But then there is the matter of a smaller paycheck, at least in the beginning, oftentimes a fraction of what we've earned for years, perhaps decades. And the old programs start replaying in our heads: What have I done? Have I lost my mind? How am I ever going to make it? When will my work grow and truly prosper? Look at Susan. She's still earning a big 6-figure income, *like I used to!*, but I'm back at a grad student's wage scale. What's wrong with me?

And then we get a call from Susan, or Dan, or Marty, who proceed to launch into their usual complaints *with a vengeance* about their nonstop work schedules, traveling more

than a United Airlines pilot, having little if any quality time at home, much less any precious down time for themselves, along with the concomitant stress, resentment (often projected onto loved ones), little sleep, and a diet that is anything but nourishing, healthy and energizing. Occasionally they express envy at our relative freedom and balance, not to mention the delight we have for what we're doing. They start hypothesizing about how many more years it will take them to reach their financial goals so that they, too, can break away from the monotonous, if agonizing treadmill they're on and get a life, a *real* life.

And then the 'thank goodness I'm out of all that' kicks in within us. And we remember why we left the corporate world, or the 24/7 start-up venture, or the thankless job to which we devoted so many years. Why did we stay there so long, putting up with the emptiness, the regrets, the loss (of life)? Good pay, for starters. And the security of a good job with a respected title, labeling us as competent, knowledgeable, successful: Senior Director, VP, Assistant Principal, you name it. But these material benefits never filled our emotional emptiness or brought us deep, lasting happiness.

The downturn in the global economy is another contributing factor motivating people to reconsider their livelihood, leave their current work life and move on to something more fulfilling and emotionally enriching. In effect, what's the point of working so hard, especially if you're not enjoying what you're doing? This is particularly poignant if you're socking away all this money so you can *eventually* go out and do what you *really* want to do, and your savings can disappear over night. What have you got to show for all those years of toil that lacked meaningful emotional reward?

The recession has helped us rethink our relationships with money, our life goals and how we're valued as individuals. Are you valued for how much you earn, or something else? Does a high salary mean you're valued by society, or is your true worth contingent upon living your life's purpose and following your innate passions? For those focused only on financial well-being, the economic meltdown has helped them realize how precarious a position that is – their wealth may be here one day and gone the next.

Career transitions are often linked with a broader reevaluation of our life. For many of us who have contemplated the shift to a new career path, or actually done it, the idea of downsizing one's lifestyle inevitably comes up. From a practical point of view, downsizing makes sense because launching a new venture is usually accompanied by a change in financial stability, at least initially. Some people view this 'launch phase' as wise investment spending, with good reason.

Along with downsizing comes an intrinsic desire to simplify, encouraging us to reconsider which things are near and dear to our hearts, and which ones aren't. In reevaluating our lives, we acknowledge what's really important and nurturing to us, which is usually a reflection of our deeply held values. All in all, this type of reevaluation is a healthy, natural part of the human maturation process. We feel guided and inspired to simplify our lives as we age, perhaps triggered at first by a change in our financial circumstances, but crucially important under any circumstances.

For some people the need to simplify is born out of feeling overwhelmed by all the stuff accumulated over the years, begging the question: Do I really *need* all of this? In these instances, ‘overload’ signals the time to pare down and live more simply, starting ASAP. The relief we feel when we de-clutter and give away excess ‘stuff’ is liberating beyond belief. Some people report a spontaneous surge in emotional vitality just from getting rid of stuff, as if the external purging gives way to internal clearing – leaving the individual feeling as if a huge weight has been lifted off their shoulders.

Simplifying our lives can also bring us closer to nature, be it walking in the park, hiking in the woods, sitting by a mountain stream, or planting a garden. We find ourselves opening up to and discovering newfound wonders in the natural world around us, which has a profound effect on the psyche and our energy level. Spending time in nature has been proven to have an emotionally soothing as well as uplifting impact. It fortifies us with a wholesome nourishment that helps us move forward feeling refreshed and revitalized, with a renewed spirit.

For those who have mustered the courage to make a major life transition, there are still occasional days when doubts plague us. Can we honestly say we’re content now? The majority of us can, easily . . . perhaps with the exception of those intermittent times when the phone doesn’t ring, when there’s not enough work, or projects are slow trickling in. And in those moments we hear how incredibly busy and financially successful Dan or Susan is, while we’re doing our utmost to generate enough satisfying work.

It’s at those times when another old program clicks in: I’m a failure. They’re working and I’m not. They have more than enough work for the two of us. What do I have to show for all my talent, autonomy and courage?

Old programs are challenging to deal with, but not impossible to change and surmount. Admitting and sharing your doubts and insecurities with an overworked, well paid friend or former colleague will likely elicit compassion and heartfelt support for the path less traveled that you’ve bravely chosen. After all, you were once like them, and they will probably share yet another war story with you about how depleting their job is, or how they wish they had the inner strength, courage and perseverance to go out on their own, follow their passion, and live their dream – just as you have.

Alternatively, you can contact someone who has set out on a similar path as you and more than likely will discover that they, too, have had some of the same judgmental thoughts and feelings about themselves. Perhaps even at this very moment. Which opens the door to sharing your inner journey with each other, thereby providing meaningful emotional support and mutual encouragement from an authentic place of caring and insight – a win-win scenario.

First, you’ll see that you’re not alone and can truly help one another. Second, you’ll realize that comparing yourself to someone else who appears to be living a rosier life is misleading, and never really works. Either they’re having their own challenging time,

simply played out in a different way than yours, or you're not taking their entire picture into consideration. If the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence, all you have to do is rewind the clock and remember how *you* felt *before* you made the big career shift in your life. Want to go back to *that* life again? I don't think so. Finally, there are no mistakes. Everything that happens to us is in our highest good. We simply need to recognize this and move forward with gratitude, belief in ourselves and a pinch of optimism.

As the economy continues to present challenges, and as we age individually and as a nation, more and more people will be soul searching, looking for a better, more robust way of living, fulfilling one's purpose in life and meaningfully relating to one other. And you can count your lucky stars for having had the insight and courage to make a big move in the right direction – toward living and expressing your passion, loosening yourself from the grip of the proverbial 'shoulds,' being truly free and feeling alive. As you shine your light, the whole world benefits!

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