THE CATALYST

When it’s time to hand in your notice to go in search of yourself

Leaving my job wasn’t a triumph or a quiet quit—it was conceding that a role I loved had swallowed my identity.

By: Suzanne Westover | Posted: October 12, 2023

When I left my job at the height of the pandemic, it wasn’t after months of quiet quitting. Nor did I do a happy dance. I didn’t see myself reflected in the media narratives about quitting one’s job.

I wasn’t like the flight attendant who went viral by dramatically announcing his departure over a loudspeaker before throwing himself down the emergency slide in an inglorious exit. And neither was I someone who’d phoned it in with the bare minimum, recusing myself from any extra duties in a form of silent protest.

I was resigning, in the truest sense of the word. I was conceding defeat without being checkmated. I had come to accept that something undesirable could no longer be avoided.

After nearly ten years, I had slowly come to the realization that a job I’d loved and been devoted to hadn’t given back to me as assiduously as I’d given to it.

Like a frog in a pot, I was brought to a slow simmer over time. And while apparently that myth has been debunked, and frogs do, in fact, have the good sense to leap out when they start to cook, I opted to braise in my own juices.

It wasn’t a choice I made consciously.

Like so many women of my age, working in professional careers while balancing a personal life, I was torn between wanting to make a difference in my work while needing to be present for my family. But my generation was sold a bait-and-switch.

We could have it all, society told us. Be powerful working moms: bosses in the board room who baked cookies on the weekend. (No one told us we’d likely get burned.)

Many of us, myself included, tried to cash in on that promise, only to discover the coupon was time-limited. At first, it’s easy to climb the ladder. But it gets harder if you find yourself stepping off and back on, as the needs of your kids, spouse or older parents ebb and flow.

So many of us wind up mid-way, too far down to be the masters of our fate, but just high enough to feel the weight of responsibility. My solution was to double down. To make the maximum input possible while stranded mid-rung.

So, I launched myself into learning everything I could about mental health, the purview of my organization’s mandate. I had a stack of books on my nightstand. I read Simon Sinek and Adam

Grant, who put organizational psychology in simple terms.

I poured over countless personal accounts of lived experience.

I delved into the imprint left by intergenerational trauma, and the indelible scars of racism on the psyche.

I composed op-eds in the shower. I practiced interviews while doing the dishes. I scribbled tip sheets on damp paper while watching my daughter's swimming lessons. I was constantly scanning the news landscape to see how our organization could be more relevant. I listened to podcasts, watched documentaries and read articles late at night. Instead of winding down on the commute, I did some of my best writing on the bus.

Yes, I truly wanted to understand better. But my motivation wasn't entirely altruistic. I also wanted *to be the best*. To affirm my place as a trusted source of information and underscore my value. I derived a sense of meaning from this work, but I should have seen the danger signs when it began to define me.

I wasn't reading the mysteries I'd always loved. I was rarely writing for the sheer joy of it. I'd let my physical wellness take a back seat. The irony of working to advance mental health and wellness, while risking mine to burn out, didn't dawn till later.

My work slowly became not just something I did, but a central fact of who I was. If you work hard enough in a (fruitless) effort to become irreplaceable, your stock in a workplace can only climb so high before the law of diminishing returns kicks in.

You work more diligently. You put in longer hours. You never turn down a colleague in need. You constantly put up your hand. "I have an idea," was my watchword in a meeting. Inevitably, the work I suggested would fall to me. And I relished it. Because it conformed to the myth I was making about my own invincibility. I could do it all, I told myself. I was the person that could always be relied upon. I wouldn't ever let anyone down.

And the cycle ticks along just fine…Until slowly you become tired. Then you start to make little mistakes. Finally, your judgement clouds and your temper shortens. Soon, I was disappointing myself. My very efforts were working against me. I was my work, but I no longer liked who I *was.*

And that, for me, was the point of no return. I wasn't a healthcare worker, or a first responder. I wasn't someone whose job puts them in harms way. There is heroism and sacrifice in that kind of selflessness.

I, on the other hand, was making a choice, which meant I could also un-choose it.

But giving up a job that's come to mean too much to you isn't done easily or without cost.

I still remember powering down my laptop for the last time. Switching off my phone. Carefully folding up my power cords. Placing the whole lot in a cardboard box and sealing it up like a time capsule. And in a way, that's exactly what it was. I was packing in the formative years of my professional career, not entirely certain what my next chapter would hold.

And while I would miss my colleagues terribly, and, much later, mourn the loss many aspects of my work that brought me joy, I knew that I had something important to do. Quitting a job doesn't have to be a celebration. Nor does it need to be done quietly. Sometimes it's too complicated to

be boiled down to a single emotion.

Maybe that’s when it’s time to hand in your notice to go in search of yourself.

Author: Suzanne Westover

An Ottawa writer and former speechwriter, and Manager of Communications at the Mental Health Commission of Canada. A homebody who always has her nose in a book, she bakes a mean lemon loaf (some would call her a one-dish wonder) and enjoys watching movies with her husband and 13-year-old daughter. Suzanne’s time with the MHCC cemented her interest in mental health, and she remains a life-long learner on the subject.

Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca