

A-Ha! Moments

Stories From Our Enlightened Members

I couldn't complain.

I was a respected Creative Director in a national advertising agency.

Happily married, mother of three amazing kiddos: a son in 8th grade, one in 4th, and a daughter in heaven (born with a rare, fatal disorder).

We were comfortable financially, though nothing extravagant; we'd worked hard to get to that point. Our daughter's short life had given us a perspective we could never have imagined. We treasured each other. We valued each day.

But my 50+ hour work-weeks and accompanying extensive travel was taking its toll. As my husband, also in advertising, began traveling more and more for work, the juggling became ridiculous. Our days were scheduled almost by the hour. Our 4th-grader wanted attention, and our independent 8th-grader was found smoking pot with friends at school.

Life was getting out of hand.

So with my agency supervisor's approval, I scheduled eight weeks off. Mostly over the summer, with a few weeks leading into the new school year. My husband and I wanted to make sure the kids started off on the right track.

I jumped into my role of stay-at-home mom, slightly afraid I'd be bored, that I wouldn't know what to do with myself. Would too much togetherness drive my kids and me apart? Just in case, I planned to spend some time playing with ideas I'd had for children's picture books, perpetual works-in-progress. I also planned to cook more, clean more, be more organized.

Well, I did cook a little more. And I also worked on my picture books. But I didn't clean more, and I wasn't more organized. Instead, I walked. Long daily walks with my husband and sons. Long talks with them, a plus. I watched late-night movies with my husband. I took naps. I talked with my sister in Ohio and my mom in Florida almost every day. I began to enjoy the moment again, not worrying if things (if we!) were 'on time.' Of course, we always were. But the angst of the schedule disappeared. I slowly relaxed into my new role.

It was surprising to me, how much I enjoyed it.

Not so surprising was how hard it was to give up my role as ad woman. I'd feared my coworkers would realize they'd get along just fine without me. I confess to checking voice mail and email far too often, for too many weeks.

One morning, while moving piles of unread magazines, an 'O' magazine fell open to Mary Lou's article, "Time Off For The Rest Of Her Life." And I was reminded again of why I was taking this time.

Taking the time. So simple, really. I took time. For my kids. For my husband. For me. I took time for coffee with my neighbor on a Tuesday morning. I took time to think about the future, rather than racing blindly towards it. I took time for possibilities.

During those weeks, through a friend of a friend, we met an orphan teenager from Russia. We seriously considered adopting her, and began exploring the adoption process. My sons were terrific. They welcomed her. They learned basic Russian phrases. They were willing to share everything in their lives with a stranger who would be their sister. In the end, we weren't the right family for this girl, but we were open to the possibility. And I loved that.

Sabbatical over, I'm back at work, trying to hang on to that sense of calm. Naturally, my coworkers survived without me. In fact, the colleague I'd asked to fill in for me during my sabbatical has permanently taken on much of my former responsibilities. I've cut back my travel considerably. I still have some crazy hours, but that's the nature of the business. I'm learning to leave that schedule angst behind.

As for possibilities, our family feels a little tighter, more connected. I sold one of my picture books; it will be published next fall.

And my husband's considering time off for good behavior himself, next year. I encourage him to take it.

— Annette, Austin, TX