

# The New York Times

ON THE WEB

February 13, 2005

AT LUNCH WITH MARY LOU QUINLAN

## She Didn't Stop the World, but She Slowed It Down

By CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH



MARY LOU QUINLAN knew that her life was going awry when she dreamed that she had broken her leg - and woke up sorry that the dream wasn't true. At least, she thought, it would have kept her in bed. There she was, to all appearances, living the perfect life: happy marriage, great job, lots of friends. But after 23 years of nonstop work, she desperately needed a break. Yet she could not bring herself to take time off.

"Women have to give themselves permission to rest," she said.

Fortunately for Ms. Quinlan, 51, she accomplished that goal with her bones intact. In late 1998, she quit her high-pressure job as chief executive of the New York advertising agency N. W. Ayer & Partners. Soon afterward she founded Just Ask a Woman, which helps companies understand the needs of their female customers. She has four employees and refuses to hire more. She will not franchise her concept, and she won't travel the globe for clients.

"I will simply not get into another situation where the price of success is giving up my life," she said.

Still, some old habits die hard: Ms. Quinlan spent her spare time these last few years writing "Time Off for Good Behavior: How Hard-Working Women Can Take a Break and Change Their Lives," published last month by Broadway Books. It is both a manual to help women fight workaholic tendencies, and a personal history. As she described herself in the book, "Mary Lou is burning the candle at both ends and craving a break."

She took one recently, in the form of a five-hour lunch with a reporter at Il Buco, a tiny restaurant on Bond Street, around the corner from her Lower Manhattan office. During the lunch, she expounded on what she sees as an epidemic of workaholic sweeping the country.

She cites surveys showing that employees hand back \$21 billion worth of unused vacation each year; that dual-income couples with children worked a combined 91 hours a week in 2002, up from 81 in 1977; that accidents, illnesses and mistakes caused by overwork cost industry more than \$300 billion a year. Modern technology - cellphones,

BlackBerries, laptops and such - is "like jet fuel, pushing work addiction into overdrive," she said.

Men are not immune, of course. But a woman, she says, is still more likely to try to be the perfect parent, the perfect boss and the perfect spouse, and much less likely to take nights out with friends. "I was brought up to believe I could do anything, so I always tried to do everything," she said.

Indeed, it is not surprising that Mary Lou Finlayson, the quintessential "Type A good girl" with an all-consuming desire for adult approval, grew up to be Mary Lou Quinlan, the recovering workaholic.

It wasn't her parents' doing. Her father, a service manager at a calculator company, told her to trust her instincts and never to follow rules blindly. Her mother, an administrative assistant, readily quit jobs in which she felt underappreciated.

It was the nuns at the Catholic schools she attended while growing up in Philadelphia who influenced her most. "The stress on obedience, perseverance, respect for hierarchies - it was great training for corporate life," Ms. Quinlan said.

In 1975, she graduated from St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia with a degree in English, and worked in fund-raising and public relations for the college. She met Joe Quinlan, a young reporter, at a convention, and the two began sharing professional stories at weekly lunches. They married in 1978 and soon moved to New York.

As Ms. Quinlan ruefully recalls, her marriage got short shrift as she progressed through a series of jobs - recruiter and then advertising director at Avon, account executive at various advertising agencies, and finally chief executive at Ayer. They were childless - conceiving, Ms. Quinlan said, "was the only thing I couldn't get an A in" - which made it even easier for her to pursue her career single-mindedly. She remembers with more than some shame leaving her husband sick with pneumonia, snowed in by a blizzard, while she went off to a business meeting in California.

Joe never threatened to leave her, she said. But one day in 1998, when she was again spending a "vacation" with a cellphone glued to her ear, he finally blew up. "His face turned dark and angry, and he said, 'I just don't know you anymore,'" she recalled. "It was a slap in the face, and a wake-up call." A few months later, she took a five-week leave. She quit soon after she returned. Nine months later, she formed Just Ask a Woman.

She is bringing home less money than she did at Ayer. But she has no regrets. "Finally, I'm doing something I can picture doing for a long, long time," she said.

MS. QUINLAN does not suggest that all harried women leave their jobs and start fresh. And she knows that women with children find it more difficult to balance their competing demands. But, during lunch, she offered several tips on how to recognize - and repair - an overstressed life:

Know the subtle signs of burnout. If you wake up routinely at 2 a.m., you are suffering from stress. If you get out of bed to check e-mail and voice mail messages, you are badly stressed. If you are responding to them at 3 a.m., you are about to burn out. But don't try to go cold turkey. Pick one night a week when you refuse to retrieve any messages. "You need to gradually detox," she said.

Control your time with pre-emptive strikes. Does your boss consistently drop by at 5:30 with a list of last-minute tasks that need doing? "At 4 p.m. each day, ask him if late stuff is mounting," Ms. Quinlan suggested. If it is, you'll get a head start; if it's not, he is less likely to burden you with it later.

Use the buddy system. Join forces with a colleague who's also overstressed. "Cover for each other if one of you needs time off; gently prod each other to take lunch breaks," Ms. Quinlan said.

Do a reality check with someone who holds your job at another company. Look through your collection of business cards; undoubtedly, you've met many such counterparts at conventions or other events. Set up a meeting with one whose work you respect. "Bring your calendar, compare daily schedules," she said. "You may find out that no, not every successful executive has 7:30 a.m. meetings every day."

Write a realistic help-wanted ad for your own job. If enticements like "sizable bonuses" or "autonomy on projects" would induce you to answer it, you are probably in the right place. But if you are sick of missing your daughter's soccer games, and the ad says "requires frequent weekend meetings," that could be a deal breaker. Evaluate whether you can skip some of those meetings; if not, send out résumés.

Make a list of things you love to do and are good at, as well as those things you hate and do badly. Then check the lists against the tasks of your typical day. "If a lot of the items on that 'hate' list are a big part of your job, no wonder you're stressed," Ms. Quinlan said.

Be methodical in planning a break. Start preparing three months in advance. Buy those casual clothes you never thought you needed. Arrange your workload and meeting schedule so you will be caught up enough to leave without guilt. Check whether you have enough vacation time built up to cover the time you need. "Even if you don't, don't assume your company won't let you take time off," she said. "Many corporate policies allow it."

Realize that time off is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Yes, go to that spa, play with your children, write those short stories. But also take time to think about why you got into such a stressful bind in the first place. "Sometimes, people realize how much time they spend just doodling around at work, and that they really could come in at 9:30 and leave at 6 if they got more efficient," Ms. Quinlan said.

Don't ask what will happen if you take time off. Instead, ask what will happen if you don't. "If you're really burned out," she warned, "your work may suffer so much that you'll wind up getting fired."