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ON THE WEB

The Line Between Mettle and Martyrdom

By LISA BELKIN

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HEN Gov. M. Jodi Rell of Connecticut stepped to the lectern to address the opening session of the State Legislature recently, the crowd went wild. Published reports describe foot-stomping and whooping from her audience.

"I look at things a little differently now, with different eyes," Governor Rell said when the ovation finally quieted. This new perspective is hard won. Beneath her navy suit and patterned scarf, she was still wrapped in bandages, recovering from the mastectomy she'd had for breast cancer nine days before.

Legislators who packed the hall later told reporters why they were cheering. They admired her courage, they said. They saw her speech as a fresh start, both against cancer and against corruption, by a governor who took office after her predecessor resigned amid scandal.

Reading about the speech, I was thinking all those things and one more: Why the heck was this woman not home in bed?

Odds are, if you've held a job, you've played hurt at least once. By this I mean you've been at your desk when you should have been in traction. Working sick comes in two categories: dragging yourself to work with something contagious, which makes you Typhoid Mary, and dragging yourself in when only you are suffering, which makes you Curt Schilling, bleeding through your sock for the sake of the team.

Liz Ryan, the founder of WorldWit, an online network for professional women, has been there. Early in her career, while she was working in human resources for a large corporation, she underwent gallbladder removal surgery. The doctor released her with orders to spend "24 hours in bed, then move slowly for a week and go back to work in 10 days." Instead, she drove directly from the hospital to her office. In 1995, she exhibited the sort of macho reserved only for women - she made business calls from the delivery room within an hour of giving birth. "I was on a conference call with our company lawyers while they were weighing the baby," she said.

Why do we do these things? Sometimes, because we have to. Four years ago, just when Bob Johnson, now director of communications for St. Bartholomew's Church in New

York, got a diagnosis of H.I.V., his boss at his previous job complained that he was not working enough overtime. "Why did I go in?" he said of the extra hours he logged despite his exhaustion. "Well, I didn't want to get fired."

When B. J. Gallagher, a workplace consultant, developed laryngitis before she was to lead a two-day workshop for the Chrysler Corporation early in her career, she used a giant bicycle horn to get the participants' attention. Why did she show up at all? "I needed the money," she said.

Governor Rell, on the other hand, did not have to give her speech to keep her job - her approval rating was 80 percent at year-end. Her press secretary, Dennis Schain, told me she was determined to send an "inspirational" message.

Mary Lou Quinlan did not have to go to work the day after breaking several ribs, either. She was executive vice president of the DDB Needham Worldwide advertising agency at the time, and on her way to give a presentation when her taxi was broadsided. Lying on a backboard in the emergency room, she screamed to her secretary: "You have to tell the client that I would never miss a meeting. Reschedule for tomorrow."

Ms. Quinlan has since become an industry legend. She worked her way up to agency president, then announced that she was taking a five-week sabbatical to re-examine her priorities in life - then quit. Now the president of her own, smaller marketing firm, she is the author of "Time Off for Good Behavior" (Broadway Books, 2005), which advocates returning sanity to busy work lives. Looking back, she says she is horrified by her broken-rib behavior.

"Back then I was proud of my dedication," she said, "but it was misplaced. I was so worried that I had disappointed the client. I don't let my real life take a back seat like that anymore."

Ms. Ryan, who also describes herself as "reformed," looks back with a similar shudder. Too many of us "peg our self-esteem to our accomplishments at work," she said. " 'Who cares if I'm sick? This is a critical project.' Also, we judge each other. 'Wow, look at Chuck; he's half dead and he's in here working.' "

Mr. Schain wants to make it clear that Governor Rell was not trying to prove anything in a way that would jeopardize her health. Her speech was trimmed to just 13 minutes, and she did not mingle with her audience before she spoke. Immediately afterward, she went home, he said.

From where I sit, that trip back home is the most inspiring message she could send.

This column about the intersection of jobs and personal lives appears every other week.
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