

more

August 1999

Escaping the fast track

AFTER TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON THE CORPORATE TREADMILL, THIS TOP AD EXEC DECIDED TO JUMP OFF. HERE'S WHERE SHE LANDED.

BY MARY LOU QUINLAN

I used to have a dream: One day I would take some time off from the round-the-clock race I called my life. A life, especially a “work life,” that had gotten out of control. Twelve-to-fourteen-hour days. Weekends filled with voice mail. Business conferences “counting” as vacation. I wanted time. Not on a beach. Time for me. To think. To wake up in my own home. Time to breathe and figure out who I had grown up to be.

But how could I make this dream come true? Quit? Get fired? Run away? Sometimes I even fantasized about breaking my leg so I'd be laid up and left alone to have some precious peace. But it isn't a dream anymore, because I got my time. I “escaped” for five weeks.

A little perspective on how I got to this point: I love to work hard. For the nearly twenty-five years of my career, I've worked like there was no tomorrow. And it paid off. I rose to become one of the few females in the country running an ad agency as chief executive officer.

But over the past few years, the relentless schedule began to wear on me. Even though the days were exciting, nights would find me wide awake in the small hours, pacing in my apartment, thinking, worrying, leaving voice mails on my employee's work phones. Some weeks, I traveled every day – a human Fedex package. I don't have children, and I'm lucky enough to have a wonderful husband, Joe, an independent television producer, who's

always supported my career. Unfortunately, that just meant I gave more and more of my time to my job.

And, although I'd been known for my enthusiasm and optimism, my temper started to rise easily. I felt out of shape and out of patience. All my energy went into my clients and my team at work; there wasn't much left for me. Sometimes I barely recognized myself.

Then it hit me: I didn't have to quit or collapse. Maybe I could just take a leave—a break. For the first time, I saw a possible solution. I have always tried to be responsive when employees needed time for family or personal leave. Now it was my turn.

I asked the owner of my company for five weeks off. And I will always be grateful that he gave me that time. I was also lucky to have colleagues and clients who supported me.

My biggest supporters, as always, were my family. My mom and dad and brother Jack, and my husband. I started my leave on my forty-fifth birthday. I called it my “walkabout,” which is a term for the old aboriginal tradition of taking a break from work to go on a long, solitary and often contemplative walk in the bush, to come back clearheaded and decisive.

I kept a journal of my time out, of what I learned, of the perspective gained. I hope it helps other women who may want to take their own walkabout.

WEEK ONE

Thursday, October 22. It started today. Truly, my “birth” day. I felt light. Today I talked to people I care about. Made my first pot of coffee at home in years. Went out to exercise. Had lunch with Joe. Bought a casual jacket. Struggled with letting go of voice mail, even on this beautiful October day. Met my brother and his wife for dinner. I love being with them. And, for the first time in ages, got a good night's sleep.

Saturday, October 24. Spent the weekend at our country house in Pennsylvania, which I had somehow let become my second office. How pathetic is that? I swept the leaves off the front porch and thought, “This is what people do when they have a home in the country.” Walked to the little town nearby for breakfast. Looked at the river. All this has been right here. Where have I been?

Monday, October 26. My first “workless” Monday. Today I woke up and said, “What do I want to do today?” I’m already saying “I” a lot. My boss wisely told me that this should be the most egotistical time of my life. But this is really new territory. I have always worried about everyone else. “We” is the word I used most often. During this time, everything will be “What do I feel like, want to do, eat, say, be?” Amazing.

I started by working out when I felt like it instead of my normal six-forty-five A.M. pre-office time slot. I finally began that protein diet. Today I read the paper, and not just the advertising news. In fact, no advertising news. No mail. No voice-mail. No email. My terrific team at the office taking care of business.

Wednesday, October 28. Well, today was a first: A kickboxing class. The teacher kept telling me to punch really hard, to think about someone I don’t like. Trouble is, I’m so relaxed, I’m not mad at anybody.

Later, I took off for one of my favorite activities (which I’d rarely done without stress) –shopping. I used to blow in and out of stores; now I talk to shopkeepers, browse to see what’s new.

WEEK TWO

Saturday, October 31. All day to myself at the house in Pennsylvania. Today I sat for an hour reading old letters from my family, from high-school boyfriends and college teachers; looking at poems, awards, report cards and school programs and, best of all, looking at old pictures.

But it was the letters that showed me how much I’ve changed. People wrote about a light they saw in me, happy and hopeful. That’s what I’d missed. I also couldn’t believe that I used to include my weight on my resume (at that point it was something to brag about). I’ve got a way to go to get back there, closer to the honest woman who was bold enough to write down what she meant to say.

Monday, November 2. This week starts with a real treat – four days in Tucson at a spa called Miraval. The change of scenery, good food, exercise and incredible pampering have put me fully into the realization zone. But I have to admit that I’m starting to feel anxious about what I will do when my walkabout is over. Putting pressure on myself to ask how I will

change my real life for the better. I've got to keep battling down the idea that I ought to rethink my career.

Friday, November 6. Today I had the best dose of reality. I flew to Los Angeles to keep a prior speaking commitment. For these past twenty-four hours, I've been surrounded again by my work life, and I can feel my blood pressure rise. Still more work to do on the not-working front.

WEEK THREE

Monday, November 9. The weekend was great. Lots of chores. Work that gets done and feels good to do. On Saturday night our friends Jane and Tom came over. Both hardworking doctors with kids and a farm. When I told Jane that I felt I needed a break after working for twenty-five years, she said, "Mary Lou, the way you work, it's like forty."

Tuesday, November 10. I treasure this time off. Just breathing. Walking slowly, or briskly. Exploring my own neighborhood for the first time. Turning left just for the heck of it. Looking out the window. Dancing. Reading. E-mailing only friends and my mom. Working out. Smiling. These are the days I don't want to end. I guess I ought to be making lists. But I just feel like shopping.

Wednesday, November 11. I've fallen into some kind of mid-leave slump. Not that I feel sad that the time is passing. I never feel that way. More that I am still struggling with myself for not resolving what I want to do next. Joseph MacDonald, a teacher at Miraval, had talked to me about the process of decision making. One of his principles was patience: Things unfold in their own time. I'm so used to forcing closure, as we call it at the office, that this slow learning is foreign territory. Just letting life and feelings happen for once. So I'm starting to let myself fantasize about creating a whole new life for myself. I'm wondering if I can find a way to connect all my strengths to a career and a life that has a little room in it for breathing. The more I let myself dream, the more I'm sure that going back can't mean going backwards.

WEEK FOUR

Monday, November 16. Each week my energy soars higher. Painted a fence this past weekend. Walked and walked in the city. The East village. The upper East Side. Went to a museum. Went to a movie alone for the

second time in my life. A younger, happier person is looking back at me in the mirror.

Sometimes I wonder what I might be giving up if I gave up my position. A lot of nice stuff comes with being the CEO of a company, even if there are headaches—invitations, open doors. And, as one of the few women who made it to this level, I enjoy a kind of minor-league celebrity in the tough ad world. Would I really be able to leave some of this behind and try something new? I have taken a lot of risks in the past, and they always paid off. Now the prize is my happiness.

Thursday, November 19. Starting to feel more excited than scared. More ready. I need to write down what I'm learning. I need to breathe and relax and focus. I need my body to be strong. Good food, good exercise. Be kind, listen and cultivate positive people. I need my sleep. I need my family and my friends. They are my strength.

WEEK FIVE

Monday, November 23. Spending the last week of my leave with my parents, who have retired to Florida. Always a great restorative. The weather, of course, is great, but their love is the tonic. My parents are so relieved that I'm finally taking care of myself. They're a little concerned that I might quit my job, but they're behind me no matter what I choose. Actually, my next steps become clearer to me when I stop trying so hard to figure out what they should be.

Monday, November 30. I can't believe I'm writing about my last walkabout day. I don't accept that it's my last, because I plan to have more of these in my life. I needed this break like I need fresh air. I would not have realized how tired I was unless I rested. How scared I was until I didn't feel afraid.

By the time I returned to work, I was ready. I felt nervous—but determined—about what I was planning. People told me I glowed. (The ten pounds off didn't hurt!) I went to my boss and told him I didn't want to be the CEO anymore; that I wanted to build a business around my own strengths—working directly with clients and developing an idea for a company devoted to understanding women. I was prepared to start the business on my own, even if it meant giving up some financial security.

But his reaction was great. He not only saw the potential in what I had laid out, but offered to create a new position for me within in the parent company. I'd still be able to work with key clients, as well as develop my women's consultancy. It worked because, in nearly five years with the agency, I had developed so much business and had strong client relationships. I was valued, and could repackage myself on my own terms.

Ironically, thought, as news of my change in title (I was now vice chairman, instead of CEO) got out, some people called to ask, "Should I say congratulations?" I think they believed I'd been kicked upstairs, that I couldn't possibly be making such a move on my own!

The real payoff comes at night. I sleep peacefully. I also smile more. But there are still days when I feel scared. Will this business fly? Can I get by without the big staff I was so used to? Do I care?

Right now the answer is no. I'm too busy being, as one friend put it, president of my own life.