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Moving On Is Hard To Do

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Barbara Moses, Ph.D, is an international speaker, work/life expert, and best-selling author of *Dish: Midlife Women Tell the Truth About Work, Relationships, and the Rest of Life*.

When a teacher friend recently retired after nearly two decades of constantly threatening to quit, I said: "Thank you, Lord, for finally putting us all out of your misery."

She had spent most of the 20 years bitterly complaining about how much she hated teaching - the apathetic kids, the overindulgent parents, the failure of the school system to actually educate.

Yet, despite her angst, she continued to teach - and moan - year after year.

Why? Because, at her core, and despite her disaffection, she still saw herself as an educator, and was not prepared to relinquish the role.

At the same time, she was overcome by guilt about failing to go the limit for her students - especially when she saw younger teachers, who cared passionately about their jobs, putting in long hours and volunteering for extracurricular activities.

She cared enough about teaching to feel she was letting the students down. But she didn't care quite enough to do anything differently. In the end, her pain and boredom became too much.

My friend's experience is typical of how many people make transitions: They are never straightforward and there is plenty of angst and ambivalence along the way.

Why is it so difficult to move on?

Most people will attribute their inertia - no matter how miserable they're feeling at their job - to a need for financial security. However, this is rarely the real issue.

Concerns about money may have played a role in my friend staying put - but it wasn't really about the money. She owns a small, mortgage-free home, her needs are modest and she could have made up any shortfall by tutoring or consulting, at least in her latter years. In other words, she had choices.

What was really going on for her, like many other people, was that she was grappling with a complex set of conflicting desires, some of which we may not even be aware of. And they lead to a cocktail of emotional confusion.

My friend's desire to maintain her idea of herself as a teacher, which was core to her identity, conflicted with her desire to leave the classroom.

Sometimes, our conflicting desires may even lead to irrational behaviour. I know one 40-year-old human resources executive who had always raved about how much she loved her job. But over a period of about a year, she became increasingly edgy and irritable.

At first, she attributed this malaise to symptoms of perimenopause. But one day, after a particularly unpleasant exchange with the senior management team about her budget, she had a meltdown and went on stress leave.

Through counselling, she came to understand her job was what had been making her depressed and anxious. Yet, when she got wind that someone was angling for her position, she immediately returned to work to protect her position.

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She did finally quit, but only after another year of vacillating between believing she could make her job work and despairing of it. She slowly realized that she had spent all of her professional life seeking a senior role in her field; once she made it, it wasn't really what she wanted to do.

Many of us reach a point in our professional lives at which work that previously engaged us is, at best, of mild interest and, at worst, a source of serious unhappiness. Most commonly, it expresses itself as a low-grade malaise or gnawing disaffection.

Often, like the teacher and the HR executive, we experience a push/pull - a push to flee what is painful, and a pull to what is familiar. The result is that, no matter how bad the situation, we become ambivalent about changing it.

But that ambivalence is usually a signal that we have moved on to a new phase in our lives. The result is often a tug-of-war between what used to be rewarding and what is currently meaningful.

A marketing vice-president described her ambivalence: "Here I was in the meeting, discussing all the things that were supposed to be important to me and my department. Nothing was going as it should. I felt compelled to give my two cents' worth, but it was like I was in a fog, and I really couldn't give a shit."

Why does it take so long to recognize? In part, it's because the transition creeps up on us. It's not like we wake up one more morning and scream: "I got it. I've moved on to a new life chapter."

Rather, most people experience a growing awareness that their work no longer holds their attention, or that things they used to care deeply about no longer resonate.

It's also because these notions of what we care about and the kind of work we do are safe and familiar, and at the core of our identity. After all, in North America at least, so much of our sense of self is tied to our professional lives.

Letting go of these old ideas about who we are and what is important to us is difficult. Sometimes, we fail to play catch-up to how we've changed. We may not even recognize that we have changed.

Take an accomplished writer friend who, for several years, suffered from what he thought was writer's block. But after consulting a therapist, he learned that he had been telling himself he "should" write - even though he had nothing he really wanted to say.

It wasn't a lack of skill or ability, but, rather, that he'd just lost his interest in writing. When something like that happens, people must face the scariest existential question: What will I become now, if I give up what I think is who I am and gives my life meaning?

We may also be nostalgic for who we once were.

I used to get very excited when I closed a sale with a client. Then one day, about 10 years ago, I made a major sale - and realized that I had very little emotional reaction to it.

Yet, right around the same time, I had written my first book - and sold all of five copies to a client for total royalties of about \$12. This put me over the moon. Clearly, I had moved on to a different source of satisfaction.

These days, although occasionally I can still get excited, I usually feel no more than pleased. But sometimes, I must confess, I miss that person who could feel that emotional high about the big sale.

When we move on, we will always feel some sadness - which is why we may resist acknowledging new life chapters.

Maybe we mourn for who we were. What does it mean if we give that up? Are we becoming old? And does this lack of interest mean we've lost it?

As one client said: "My greatest fear is to be seen as someone who has no fire in their belly."

A few years ago, I bumped into an old friend, who I'd known as a passionate artist when she was in her twenties. She'd had some modest success, having exhibited at a young age at a prestigious gallery.

She'd hit 40 when we met again and I'm embarrassed to admit that I was shocked and actually felt myself recoiling when she told me that she had become a librarian and no longer had any interest in art.

I thought: "Were you just playing a role when you saw yourself as an artist but, all along, it really had no meaning for you?"

What I realize now is that my shock was probably more about me than about her. It was a reminder to me of change and of getting older. She had simply moved on.

The next chapter

Are you moving into a new life chapter? Take this quiz to find out:

- Does work that previously excited you no longer hold your interest?
- Do you feel like you're "going through the motions?"
- Do you have a gnawing feeling there is something else out there that is calling you?
- Do you sometimes muse nostalgically on what you used to love but for which you can no longer summon excitement?
- Are you having trouble letting go of old scripts about who you are and what you do?
- Do you find it hard to talk with enthusiasm about what you do?
- Do you feel a twang of envy of friends who have made bold moves in their lives?
- Do you sometimes ask yourself: "Is this all there is?"
- Do you feel inert: You feel you want to do something different but can't bring yourself to do so?

If you answered "yes" to most of these questions, you are likely moving into a new phase of your life. You may also be experiencing burnout from work that no longer interests you.

What to do:

Identify what is holding you back: loss of status associated with your job title, inertness, fear of failure in a new endeavour, lack of readiness to make a move, fear that it all means you are getting older.

Be honest with yourself: Avoid the knee-jerk temptation to say, "I can't afford to make a move," unless it really is true. If you feel like you are ready for a move but can't identify what it is you really want to do, start actively investigating alternatives while taking advantage of your current paycheque.

Look at what you really care about now. Maybe work has lost its importance in your life relative to other desires. If you are at retirement age and still want or need to work, this doesn't mean you need to disengage from work all together; rather, you need to reappraise the role of work in your life. Are you still holding on to old scripts about who you are and what you do? If you are younger, this also doesn't mean you need to quit your job. Perhaps, as in a relationship, you are expecting too much from your job.

Re-evaluate how you are spending your time. Is your work interfering with other areas of interest? What can you do to accommodate them?

Get outside help. These are large questions that can't be answered in a paint-by-numbers style. Many people benefit from the aid of a therapist in sorting through them.