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SERVING CHARLOTTE AND THE METROPOLITAN AREA

After long climb up the corporate ladder, what's next?

“The time has come,” the walrus said.

The words of the childhood poem filled Avery's head as she tried to push back the unsettling thoughts that had come to fill her days. She needed to remind herself that she was a member of an elite group — the first generation of women to occupy the executive suite by age 40. She was one of the “trailblazers” at her company, and she was not going to let any unsettling thoughts find their way to the surface and disrupt her bliss. She had worked too hard for too long and had come too far to let some “discontent” rattle her.

Avery (not her real name) had been in high school when the women's movement started. She and a number of friends had driven to New York to hear Gloria Steinem speak. They had pledged that they would always “shoot for the stars.” And they had done just that.

Avery had majored in business in college and pursued a career in the computer industry after she graduated. Throughout her career, Avery was lucky to have mentors, usually male. They coached her on negotiating tactics and presentation skills. They provided opportunities for her to demonstrate her technical skills. Occasionally, over a late-night dinner, they also coached her on how to dress, how to speak, and how to navigate the “old boy's network.”

Avery was careful to listen to her mentors' advice when a career opportunity presented itself. At times, she felt that she was “job hopping” or worse, applying for a job that was ill-suited to her abilities or mismatched with her personal style. But her mentors reassured her that each move was necessary in the climb up the corporate ladder. So, up

she climbed. In each of these jobs, she was a quick study.

Avery also managed to balance her work with her family life. She timed her pregnancies well, shared child-rearing responsibilities with family and raised two wonderful children.



Earning a Living; living a life

ANGELINA CORBET

Then, just before her 45th birthday, Avery was promoted to senior vice president. Although she would never admit it, she tingled with the sense of power that accompanied the promotion. She glowed in the sense of freedom that this promotion should afford her. She might even shed some of the vestiges of her corporate armor by “dressing down” on Fridays.

Two years later, she was sitting in the same corner office, reciting the familiar verses from *Alice in Wonderland*. She wondered if the promotion that was the fulfillment of her dream was also the beginning of the end. During the past two years, she had become tired, bored and restless. She thought about taking a long vacation: If only she could get away from it all and re-evaluate her options. No, maybe she could do volunteer work on week-ends or spend more time with her new grandchild.

As she pondered these options, she realized that she was terrified by the thought of leaving the corporate setting. The women's movement that had framed her thinking 25 years ago had encouraged her to align her self-image

and self-worth with the workplace. If she was not a senior vice president, then who was she?

The challenges that Avery faces are the challenges that many in the generation of “skirts” face once they've climbed the corporate ladder and don't necessarily like the view from the top. They use words like “bored” and “unfulfilled” to describe their careers and talk about the frustration of “playing by the rules” in the corporate setting. They're searching for “meaning” in their lives.

They are also tired — they have been working hard and long at two full-time jobs, one at home and one at work for 25 years. They have succeeded at everything they have begun, yet they feel empty.

Today, Avery is taking a sabbatical and going through a self-assessment process. She's taking a fresh look at her abilities, interests and values. As she explores her spiritual nature, she is discovering her place in the universe is more important than her place on the corporate ladder. She is hopeful that when she ultimately returns to the world of work, she will have the same energy that she had when she was 20.

Her courageous move has inspired colleagues and friends to share their doubts and fears about these same issues with her. “The time has come ...”

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