

Kids back to school! Are you a parent at a crossroad in your life?

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When I was in elementary school and summer was ending and fall fast approaching, I remember the butterflies in the pit of my stomach. I wonder if kids today are as anxious as I was, but I know that for many parents, because I am a mother now, fall brings a mixture of many possible emotions: relief, excitement, confusion, and anxiety are but a few.

You may be feeling a desire to be a fly on the wall in the classroom of your child for the first month of kindergarten; perhaps you'd like to fling yourself at the nearest train as your "baby" in 3rd grade leaves the house for the first day back without a hug or goodbye kiss! You may be relieved or even joyful that summer is over since now your 6- and 8-year-olds have more space between them at school than you could create with consequences. But still those fall butterflies flutter in your gut.

Most people view the start of a new school year as a beginning, but it is also an ending. Perhaps, it's the end of your role as the most important person in your child's life as teacher, nurturer and coordinator. You're not feeling as needed as in past years. Now, when a friend asks what you are doing in the fall it's not so easy to say. You feel like you should, need, or even want to go back to work, but you find yourself procrastinating about contacting your past network of colleagues.

You're not sure what to do first, or exactly how to network. You're not enthusiastic about job searching and feel rusty at the career game you used to play so well. You doubt your skills and qualifications. How can you compare with the eager and vivacious 20 and 30 somethings or your own age mate that never left work? Don't they have their finger on the current work pulse from which your grip has slipped? And besides, you're actually not sure you want to return to the same kind of work anyway! You feel very different than you were then. You are.

A lot has happened since you've become a parent! You've risen to all kinds of challenges, and developed and demonstrated new abilities to successfully deal with them. Clearly, you are in a different place in life now. It's likely your values, motivations and commitments have shifted. For example, time flexibility to participate in your kids' school extracurricular activities is now an important criterion in a job. Or perhaps making important decisions, like you do for your family, is a driving desire for your work life. Maybe the outcome you were paid to achieve on the job is no longer exciting. That also can be a source of dis-ease.

If you used to be an artist creating animated figures for computer games and now increasing children's entertainment time on the couch makes your stomach tighten, you might consider other options. If you don't go back to the same work, what can you do? How can you get hired in such a competitive job market?

These haunting questions don't go away. You feel like you are in a dark tunnel with the words, "Who are you?" echoing in your ears. Is there a connection between this and those butterflies? The bad news is that you have lost parts of your previous identity. The good news is you can uncover fresh, new parts. Because you are "in the forest," it is difficult to accurately see the trees.

Our minds usually think in black and white and either/or terms. This kind of thinking is extremely limiting. Since a career decision has a huge impact on your future happiness and will directly affect your family as well, it makes good sense to ask for guidance at this important crossroad.

Experienced career counselors/coaches have specific processes to objectively, thoroughly and creatively help you make more informed and conscious decisions about your work and life. This will result in increased clarity, focus, self-confidence and success in navigating through your life. Who knows? Maybe someday your kids will even thank you for setting that kind of example!

Jump-Start Tips to:

Clarify Your Career Direction:

- Identify your 5 most important work values or motivations, e.g., helping others, making a lot of money, creativity, or time flexibility.
- List your 4 most important skills/talents that you love to do. These may include educating others, solving problems, creating recipes, healing people, or designing things.
- Determine the 4 needs of others you wish to address, e.g., health, education, environment, and communications.
- State the results your work will achieve, e.g., increasing children's reading levels at school; increasing stamina, endurance and speed for athletes; improving people's awareness of nutritional alternatives to enhance their health and wellness.

Improve Your Job Hunt:

- Spend 60% of your time in face-to-face contact with people who are in the work place. This includes using time standing in line at the grocery store or talking to people at the health club as long as the conversation is about the kind of work, company or industry you are targeting. Face-to-face contact yields the highest results in a job search.

- Limit your time applying to advertised jobs on the Internet, especially those from job boards (i.e. CareerBuilder.com, Monster.com), since competition is so fierce, and resumes often go into a "black hole".
- Spend time researching and discovering the "hidden job market" (companies and hiring managers that are not yet looking to hire but have pressing needs). Due to changes such as growth and down-sizing, new challenges arise for companies and hiring managers which necessitate alleviating new pains. Target this less competitive and therefore more effective market using creative job search methods, by proposing solutions similar to those you have already accomplished elsewhere.
- Talk to the people in your network and enlarge it. Join as many professional or volunteer organizations as you can. Participate in local government or your community.
- Ask people for their advice in your job search. Don't only ask if they know of an opening.
- Consider temporary volunteer work to test out a career interest or "get a shoe in" your desired industry or company.
- Don't stop job hunting full force until you've got your job!

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