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I Quit!

Love your work or loathe it, we all fantasize about our dream jobs.

Tralee Pearce considers the perks, problems, and practicalities of the mid-career shift.

In her heyday at Radio-Canada, Anne Van Burek was one of only two high-powered news editors, during such historic events as the Jonestown Massacre, in 1978. So what did she do the moment she was offered a promotion to management? She turned it down in favour of eking out an existence as a poet and teacher.

“I remember the turning point,” says Van Burek, now 62. “I was nearing 40, I was increasingly unhappy with the constraints of my environment. I felt I’d gone as high as I could in that area.”

Call it the inner glass ceiling. When many women, whether they’re 30 or 50, start bumping up against it repeatedly, they know it’s time for a change – often leaping right off the corporate ladder.

Julia Moulden, a midlife coach in Toronto who specializes in career reinvention, says women don’t wake up one day and find out they’re bored, but that one of two conditions generally precedes it. “One is a sense that you don’t have when you’re young: that you’re mortal,” says Moulden. “The other is usually a crisis of some kind – divorce, illness, or job loss.”

Moulden herself added midlife coaching to her existing career – writing speeches for CEOs – when she was in her mid-40s. A divorce a few years later was the tipping point. “I started to get serious. I thought ‘What am I doing with the rest of my life?’”

Chilean-born, Argentinean-raised Cecilia Jabbaz, 37, ditched not one but two jobs – first, as a prop stylist for commercials, later as a dog groomer – and traded them in for a glamorous new life as a jewellery designer. After Jabbaz’s stint as a beader for another designer, a friend – who had bought a \$3000 piece Jabbaz had worked on – urged her to break out on her own. “I interned with a goldsmith in Los Angeles and learned about the possibilities of metal,” recalls Jabbaz, who emigrated to Toronto in 1982 and now supports herself with her own business. “Now I’m in my second year, and I’m really doing what I love.”

That includes travelling to Bali, India, Mexico, and Brazil in search of stones and talented silversmiths who can craft her designs. Under her label, From the Earth, Jabbaz sells rings, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings adorned with precious and semi-precious stones, at trunk shows and select retailers, for \$50 to \$350.

While some reinvent themselves by finding new jobs, others require the backdrop of an entirely different country to start over. When Kristie Robinson and Lucy Cousins, who

met while working on a newspaper in Bolivia three years ago, started feeling antsy at their London-based jobs – Robinson in the press office of an international development charity, and Cousins at *Condé Nast Traveller* – they hatched a life-changing plan in booming post-currency crash Argentina.

“I was churning out press releases about things the charity was doing around the world, particularly in Africa, and organizing journalists’ trips to visit projects overseas,” says Robinson. “I realized *I* wanted to be the person going overseas – to go back to my journalistic roots, not sit in an office in London.”

As for Cousins, she wanted more say in the final editorial product. So they started a brand new, English-language Buenos Aires newspaper, which saw its first edition that past June.

“We really missed South America and both loved Buenos Aires. It was perfect timing, really,” says Cousins. “We’re both 27, with a lot of energy and passion for this project. Buenos Aires has been changing and growing since the crash. There’s a definite market for our paper.”

It’s been a challenging 24/7 operation but also rewarding. “I’m actually making a difference in terms of the social issues we highlight,” says Robinson. “We’ve hit o something that was clearly lacking.”

Indeed, a hint of success may be all the momentum you need to keep a new venture going. After a detour into writing children’s programming at TVO, the Sorbonne-trained Van Burek buckled down to write poetry and soon had a book published. Her second, exploring the women in her Russian family, is set to debut.

“At public reading, the feedback I got was very encouraging,” says Van Burek. “This was a lot closer to what I wanted to do.” She was then approached to become a teacher. Like many women who become coaches or yoga instructors after years spent sitting in boardrooms, Van Burek speaks of her career shift in spiritual terms. “What I do now answers a kind of deep calling. Money and prestige are not keys to my happiness or inner peace.”

Former publicist Michelle Cliffe once swanned around Toronto’s Fashion Week wearing a headset, designer duds, and skyscraper heels. In the past year, she’s traded it all in for life in the non-profit world.

“I’d been unhappy for about a year,” says Cliffe, who shut down her eponymous PR firm in March. At first, she thought she’d quell her disenchantment with the fashion industry by volunteering. Her first gig was with a group called Earth Rangers. “I wore scrubs and running shoes and cleaned up raccoon shit. It was great.” The experience gave Cliffe the confidence to follow her heart to post-Katrina Louisiana last fall to volunteer as a pet rescuer. “After I came home, if I had ever been unsure I was crystal clear now.”

At 30, Cliffe's younger than most career shape-shifters, but she's internalized similar lessons. "I can do it and not be scared," she says. "I don't want to be 50 and thinking, Shoulda, coulda." (The fact that she's getting married and is expecting a child this winter just adds to the thrill of change.) Word got out and the World Society for the Protection of Animals contacted her about contract work. While it didn't happen, she says, "That's my dream workplace. They don't have anything full time yet, but I'm hoping." A private foundation also approached her to help plan an upcoming festival.

For those who strike out on their own without an ideal workplace in mind, it can be tough to sketch out a new career. To establish herself, Moulden worked pro bono for friends, helping them assess their skills, conduct research, and create plans. Now she charges \$300 an hour and has success stories to her credit, such as the 30-something dancer who decided to pursue an MBA and is now consulting for the World Bank. Moulden is currently working on a book about the topic. "Once you take the step," she says, "you have no idea where it will lead."

In her new book, *Dish: Midlife Women Tell the Truth About Work, Relationships, and the Rest of Life*, career guru and author Barbara Moses sounds a note of caution for those fantasizing about a second act. She suggests that women think about strategies that will give them a sense of renewal with minimum risk. Indeed, many women who've made the leap will tell you that instead of a complete break with the past, their new careers build on the traits they've honed in their previous lives."

Cliffe offered her PR skills to get her foot in the doors of non-profit agencies. And Van Burek says speed writing three-minute news clips was great writer's block salve. "You don't have to completely give up your life in order to find a more meaningful career," says Moulden. "You can leverage existing skills to create something new."

That's exactly what "mompreneur" Maureen Dennis, 29, the founder of Toronto-based Wee Welcome, has been doing for two years. Before she dreamt up a printed guide of baby-welcoming shops, restaurants, and events, Dennis led a hectic, party-filled life in business and marketing for Famous Players. The mother of two worked right up until the birth of her first child, Aiden, now two and a half.

"I was at a Jane's Addiction concert the night before he was born," says Dennis. "I loved my baby, but I still wanted a life. I found it hard to get out to places that welcomed babies."

It was while she was breastfeeding in a coffee-shop bathroom stall that Dennis, a self-professed "compulsive ideas person" decided on her new venture. Three years later, Dennis has 10 regional representatives across the country, 600,000 published guides and a monster website, weewelcome.ca. "I've gained time with my kids and the flexibility to work when I can, and be a mom when I need to be."

Jennifer East sees her evolution as organic. She'd worked at her family's resort, Killarney Mountain Lodge, on Georgian Bay, Ontario, for most of her adult life (she's still there

part time). She was working in marketing, but she knew she needed something more. After a six-month sabbatical in Africa, she started down the path to reinvention – into coaching and consulting. “I realized it was always the people and the staff that I most enjoyed working with – not necessarily the marketing,” she says.

East struck on a highly original niche: helping manage change in family businesses. What to do when the kids don’t want to run the resort? Who inherits the shop? When to sell? She networked through industry associations and now gets referrals from accountants, lawyers, and estate planners. “Eighty to 90 per cent of businesses such as ours are family-owned,” she says. “It’s a very timely issue. It’s a challenging time for traditional business.”

Like many others in her position, East, 34, suggests that any woman making a leap first consider the effects on her personal life. “I’m single. It probably helps,” she says. “But the work I’m doing for other people is helping me in my own life.”

Other tips to remember: Do you research and talk to lots of people, as obvious as that sounds. Do you know how much (or little) freelancers make? Have you ever read a nurse’s schedule? “[Talking to] two people is good; 50 is better,” says Moulden.

Time and structure are other musts. Instead of walking into the boss’s office and quitting with only a vague notion of your next move, map it out. Life – kids and mortgages and social commitments – will get in the way. “We all have dreams,” says East. “Whether you hire a coach or not, I recommend you check in with someone regularly and say, ‘Here’s where I’m at’.” And, yes, you might want to check in with your banker and your significant other on what you can and can’t live without.

“The money thing was really tough,” says Cliffe. “The biggest thing was simplifying my life and not having 14 pairs of shoes. But I took enough time to make my decision, so everything that happens is fine because I’m where I want to be.”