

Your 24/7 Job

Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

“I felt like I had a sibling,” said the only child, now CEO of the company her parents had founded. “Every night at the dinner table, my parents talked about the business as if it were a second child, one needing special and constant attention. I swore I’d never be like them, but here I am. . .” she said with a rueful laugh about her own non-stop obsession with her business.

The CEO perch looks pretty cushy from the lower rungs in the cage. The air up there is surely fresher, the feed better, the mirrors larger. And few dare to ruffle your feathers. Living ON that perch, however, is markedly different than the lower ranked birdies realize.

“We have no hobbies,” the bank president told me. You are never NOT at work. Contrary to your staffers, you bring home papers that actually leave your briefcase after dinner. You may indeed be playing golf, as the envious wannabes harrumph while passing your empty office on a perfect autumn day, but you’re swinging clubs with a bank manager who has a death grip on your line of credit. You go to exotic places for conferences and spend time developing necessary alliances, grateful that you at least can SEE the pool from your meeting room. You may occasionally sit at home and watch “The Sopranos;” but while the thug life blinks on the screen, you’re tugging your lower lip and worrying about the new marketing strategy.

Your spouse knows all too well that vacant look telegraphing you’re here in body only; that ruined chicken because the meeting with the out-of-town client went late; that missed bedtime of your kids. Most of them don’t understand or appreciate your magnificent obsession. A few — lucky for you — deem themselves your partner in this operation, show up at boring client dinners, sometimes acting as a key advisor; they give you the latitude to do your business and drive ALL the car pools.

Some of this you get straightened out in your 50s when ambition, mortality, and meaningfulness create a transition stew from which you emerge a changed person. Nonetheless, your business continues to fascinate, compel, draw you in, distract you from the life others around you are leading. The people who want your job eagerly take vacations, watch the clock on Fridays, refuse the high-overtime assignment. They’ll never move a step closer to your hallowed halls until they realize there’s hardly anyplace else you’d rather be at any time than obsessing about this extra sibling in your house.

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