

Layoff: A Detour

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Get a good education." "Go to college." "Make something of yourself." They were the words I recall my dad saying to me as a child. He was a plumber who always fretted over the fact that he had been unable to go to college and literally had to "get his hands dirty" to make a living.

One day I remember my father coming home from work very upset. He had wanted a seat on the board of directors of a local bank and was denied that seat. I recall him ranting and raving over the fact that had he been a white-collar worker he would have had a seat on that board. But he was *only* a plumber and could never measure up to all those educated people on the board. That scene left an impression on me. I vowed from that day on that I would go to college to "get a good education." That act would be a tribute to my dad. Unfortunately, my dad died when I was 15 and never was able to see his daughter graduate from college, obtain a master of science degree, a sixth-year certificate, and pursue a doctor of philosophy degree.

When I was in 1st grade, a non-English-speaking boy named Robert moved into my class. I remember all the difficulties he had with his reading. He sat for hours trying to get these strange symbols down on paper.

Mrs. Curtiss, my teacher, used me as a "teacher" to help him with his work. I remember the joy I felt when I was able to help Robert understand his

work. His smile told me that this was to be my calling in life. I was going to help other children like Robert. I was going to be a teacher.

I loved school. I set up a mini-classroom in my basement, forcing my brothers to play school with me. I kept every used workbook from school and once even got my hands on a teacher's grade book — oh, what joy! Every summer I longed for Labor Day. To this day, the first day of school conjures up anticipation.

In 1974, I returned to the school that I attended as an elementary student and began my teaching career. That year it was Mrs. Curtiss' last year of teaching before retiring. I remember that it took me the entire year to feel comfortable calling her Eleanor. After all, she was my hero.

I spent 12 years as a classroom teacher, 4 years as a district administrator, and most recently, 11 months at the Connecticut State Department of Education.

At the State Department of Education, I was involved in policy decisions and was able to effect change on the state level. The position was wonderful but short lived. With the current recession, the budget crisis in Connecticut, and the lack of agreement by the unions, I, along with 3,900 state workers, was the recipient of a pink slip.

I was crushed. Emotions varied daily from sadness to anger to indifference. I was in mourning for a job I loved. How could this be? I did exactly what my dad had told me to do. I went to college and went to college and went to college. I have been in school since I was 5 years old. Here I was, age 39, a doctoral student, and unemployed. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

I am a worker. I need to work. Much of my self-esteem comes from

my work. Most of my conversations revolve around work. I began to think about what I will talk about now that I'm unemployed. "So, Nancy, what are you doing now?" I pondered for a few weeks and decided to call myself an education consultant. I once heard that education consultants are people who are unemployed with business cards. Perfect — if I only had the business cards!

My husband advised me to see my situation as an opportunity. Maybe I should pursue another career and forget education. I began to think of what I enjoy doing that I could convert into a career. I find that I spend my free time reading education journals or current books in education. My friends ask why I can't loosen up and leave my job behind. The truth of the matter is I can't. I am consumed with education. The magic began as a little girl in 1st grade when Mrs. Curtiss gave me the opportunity to work with Robert. That experience instilled in my heart something that cannot be destroyed — not even by a pink slip.

I know that there are many educators throughout this country who, like me, have been the recipients of a pink slip. Many are dedicated, caring, and excellent educators who have spent long hours pursuing their lifelong dreams to make a difference in the lives of children. We must not allow layoffs to shatter our dreams. It's important that we look at the loss of our jobs not as dead-ends but just as detours. Those of us with the burning desire to help kids will be back on the road again. After all, we have a gift that the Roberts of this world are waiting to receive.

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