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'I never wanted to be a lawyer but now I'm stuck'

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THE PROBLEM

I did not grow up wanting to be a lawyer, I just ended up there because I had good grades and was attracted to the big salary. I left everything in my early 30s and travelled the world for two years, but then I had to come back to law-related work to pay the mortgage. Now I'm in my late 30s and desperately want to do something meaningful. But I have obligations, have acquired a lifestyle. So I lack the courage to change completely, to give up the big salary, even though I know I could be much happier living another life...but how to get there?

Lawyer, male, 30s, London

LUCY KELLAWAY: THE ANSWER



>You say you want your work to be "meaningful". I cannot think of any work I would describe that way, expect possibly farming, teaching and nursing. All office work fails this test horribly.

Your predicament says more about you than about your job – I suspect you are generally fed up with life. When I get depressed journalism seems pointless; once I perk up the job starts to seem better, too.

You need to ask yourself other, more practical things about the law. Are you good at it? Do you actually hate it? If so, why? And, most importantly, what else could you do that you would like better?

This is where you come unstuck. As you do not seem to have a fantasy (mine is about teaching maths), you would do better not to change career, but change your attitude towards it instead.

If you insist on clinging to your (optimistic) view that you would be happier in another job, try this. For the next six months live like a pauper on your handsome salary. And in every minute of spare time, actively research the other things you could do. Use your legal background to work for an NGO or do legal aid work, or retrain as a barrister. Or consider something else altogether: become an organic ostrich farmer.

If an idea takes root, use your savings and do it. If not, make the best of your present job. Stop asking yourself what it means, or whether you are happy. Find other nice things to do when you are not working and try to enjoy the money. And if you cannot enjoy it, give it to charity.

WED A LAWYER Speaking as an ex-lawyer, my solution was to marry one of the firm's partners

and rely on his humungous income.

>Entrepreneur, female, 40s

BE A FROG A first step would be to find something else to do which is not necessarily nirvana in itself but is hopefully on the right Tube line to it. Once you're moving, you can change and importantly you should have a better idea of what not to do. Think of it as a frog crossing a pond using lily pads, rather than making it in one hop.

>Broker, male, 40s

GROW UP If you travel the world for two years in your early thirties after having worked for a few years already, you must expect to have lost the plot when you return. Interrupting your career at that age gives the worst of impressions to a future potential employer. To remedy this, you might consider spending less time whingeing and, instead, rolling up your sleeves and starting again. In other words, grow up.

>Banker, male, 50s

STATE SECRET The solution to your lifestyle problem is such that if widely known would result in the collapse of the financial services industry. It would prompt a mass exodus that would prove devastating to the UK economy. Therefore it is not in the national interest that the solution be divulged.

>Stockbroker, male, 30s

JUMP Ten years ago I quit my well-paid job and became a photographer. My friends called me crazy. But I emerged after years of commitment to my art at greater peace with myself than if I hadn't started the journey. Art is nothing without context. The context is commitment. My advice: jump. Don't worry if the bungee cord is attached or not.

>Photographer, male, 60s

LAW MATTERS Solving the problems of clients and maintaining the legal rights of people and indeed the nation is one of the most important, interesting and challenging careers in the UK. There are few jobs as interesting or "meaningful". You need to count your blessings and give yourself a good talking to.

>Lawyer, female, 40s

HAVE KIDS Start a family. This may give purpose and reason to paying the mortgage. Manager, male, 50s

THE NEXT PROBLEM

A colleague has approached me to sponsor him on a charity trip in the Andes. The cause is not one I would normally support, but I am concerned that a refusal could be misconstrued as a statement either that I dislike him personally, or that I actively oppose the charity, which acts to alleviate poverty among one ethnic group. Nearly all my immediate colleagues and my superiors have agreed to sponsor the trip, some very generously. However, I feel it is being undertaken mostly for pleasure and that he should make his own donations. Should I shut up and pay up, politely refuse without giving a reason or state a reason why I am refusing – and if so, what reason?

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