

FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Lawyers Concerned For Lawyers Caught Between Cultures

BY DR. JEFF FORTGANG

Q. After law school on the West Coast, I returned to work at a firm in the Boston area, where I was raised, partly to please my parents in Andover. That move has turned out to be more problematic than I anticipated, and I'm a bit at a loss as to where I go from here.



Dr. Jeff Fortgang

The culture at the Boston firm is very different from what I experienced at firms where I worked during law school. I was placed in a department that has little overlap with my actual interests and values, and it seems that the expectations are that (a) I should already know everything I thought I'd be learning, and (b) no matter how deluged I am, each assigned task is a priority and should be done very soon and flawlessly. Other associates are in more or less the same boat, and it helps a bit to commiserate with them (when we can find the time), but I have to say that I dread

Mondays. There is almost no time for social life or fun, and I feel kind of lost and disappointed in my career.

I have been thinking of going back to the West Coast, where there may be a job for me (albeit, less well paid) at a firm I know from law school, and where, in addition, I can be near my boyfriend, who teaches in that area. But this brings up another issue, which is that my parents, who are well educated but born abroad and still oriented to a different culture, are applying considerable pressure for me to stay near them, anchored to family. I love them dearly and hate to let them down, but I don't want to let myself down either.

A. In essence, you are experiencing a culture clash in two settings, and feeling trapped in the middle. On the professional front, you are in a culture that values and rewards the pressure-cooker life of the driven associate at a large firm (which is about as enjoyable and nurturing as the life of a medical resident working 36-hour shifts, but better paid). But that life tends to undervalue human needs and leaves you veering far from the goals that drew you to law school. At the same time, you are caught in a bind between following your own wishes (for relationship and

lifestyle) and the expectations of your family's culture of origin, in which filial obligation is paramount.

When it comes to work, it's possible that you would be happier in the West Coast setting you mention, though it's also possible that the geographical move will not change your reactions to the kinds of pressures placed on associates. You might want to consider meeting with a therapist and/or lawyer-career coach familiar with "lawyer culture" to work on ways to set boundaries that permit somewhat better life balance, assert yourself with partners in a way that does not backfire, and find the kind of mentoring you need but are not getting. Over time, you could also seek avenues to reconnect with your sense of career mission and gradually develop a plan to move in that direction. (More fulfilling kinds of work might entail a drop in income, but you have not mentioned large financial demands as one of the demands you face.)

Finding a balance between your parents' expectations and your own needs can be quite a challenge. We live in a society that tends to emphasize the needs of children over those of their parents, and in that context it would seem too great a sacrifice for you to stay in Boston solely to avoiding ruffling family

feathers. But it is also important to take in account how you yourself will feel in the long term about a major move — whether you'll be subject to guilt and, if so, how you will cope with that, or whether you will often wish you were not so far away (e.g., if things don't go smoothly with your boyfriend, or as your parents age). If you decide to seek the help of a therapist, finding one familiar with your family's culture might be valuable (and LCL is glad to help you in the process of exploring options). You have the right to make your own decisions. After you take time to think them through, taking your feelings into account, and to talk these issues over with someone who is supportive but objective, a path may emerge that is promising on both career and personal levels. ■

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