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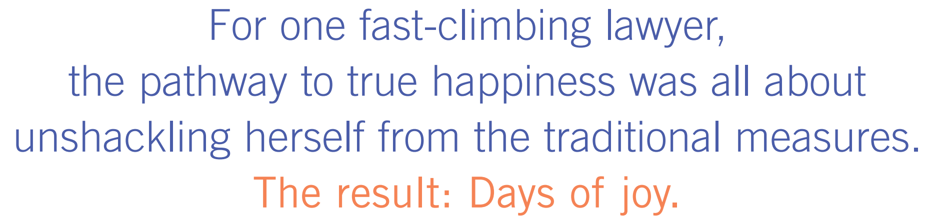

For one fast-climbing lawyer,
the pathway to true happiness was all about
unshackling herself from the traditional measures.
The result: Days of joy.

Success Redefined

by Curt Rosengren

Photography by Allison Shirreffs

As she launched her career, Dahlia Lithwick seemed destined for success. Her Yale education, Stanford law degree, a stint as a clerk in the 9th U.S. circuit appeals court, and rising stardom within her law firm all pointed to a career filled with money and status. There was just one small glitch in the plan – she hated it.

At first, she didn't pay too much attention to the rumblings of dissatisfaction. "I just thought the way our parents' generation thought," Lithwick says. "Your job is supposed to suck. This isn't about passion. You do this because you have a family and a mortgage. I thought happiness was something that happened between 9 a.m. Saturday and 10 p.m. on Sunday."

Law had been a way to fill in the blank when faced with the question, OK, what next? "Eighty percent of my graduating class from Yale was going to law school or business school or med

school," she says. "There weren't a lot of models for success other than being a professional and having a certain standard of living."

But "law school was the three worst years of my life," says Lithwick. "I knew I had made a horrendous mistake, but didn't have a sense for how to undo it or what I would do instead."

After school, Lithwick opted for a slower paced, smaller city path to success, forgoing the high-pressure, high-dollar fast track at a big city law firm. It helped her keep things in perspective. "I really was able to say, here it is – I'm making enough money to buy nice stuff, and I can buy a house, and the partners of the firm were telling me I could be a partner in three years.

"I knew what success looked and smelled like, and it just didn't look and smell good."

The feeling of discontent alone may not have been enough to prompt a change if she hadn't begun to see a drastic shift in her law school classmates. "People who were with top firms, had great jobs and were making $180,000 a year were starting to 'self-medicate,'" she remembers. "There was so much drinking. And so much, 'I'm depressed, I need to be in therapy.' And I'm thinking, you're not depressed – you're human, and you're sentient and your job sucks!"

Finally, Lithwick knew she needed to escape law. But where to go?

Making the **Change**

Earlier, she had decided against being a writer – a career she deemed "narcissistic, silly, artistic and not professional." Yet she knew writing was an important piece of her identity. "I was one of those people who had kept a journal since I was 10. I was always writing for me. It was something that I did the way other people breathed."

Ironically, law school brought out the best in her writing. "When I get really stressed, I can slide out of the moment and stand back critically and write a funny little essay about it. And everybody's like, that's so true!" It was the kind of writing that inevitably ends up on someone else's refrigerator.

But writing? As a living? Could she build a career from what she called "a little self-indulgent thing I did to keep myself sane?" Not surprisingly, a flood of negative images rushed into her brain. "The fear and doubt was about money, social status, was I wasting my graduate degree," Lithwick remembers. "What will my family think? How do I sleep at night knowing that I've wasted all this?"

Finally, she looked at her writing and thought, "This is the one thing I know I love, beyond reason. To not at least try and do it seems crazy."

So, in the summer of 1998, Lithwick began socking away money every month. "The minute I got my paycheck I wrote a check to savings and lived on the rest, and if I couldn't, I ate beans." She countered her fears by giving herself a defined amount of time, reminding herself that she could go back to law if things didn't work out.

And in October 1998, she quit the firm and at 7 a.m. the next day began writing a novel at her computer. She had a feeling her parents wouldn't approve. "I remember writing a long letter saying, 'Look, here's what I'm doing, and here's why. I understand how every one of your protective instincts is going to recoil at this, but I just need to do this.' And they were great about it – I don't think they were happy, but they got it."

'Leaving a **Cult**'

To help cope with the stress, she set limits. "I gave myself a year," she says, possibly too narrow a window but "a useful tool in terms of being brave enough to do it. I had very clear boundaries. I knew exactly how much time I had. I knew exactly how much money I could spend every day."

Preparation took the edge off her fear as well. "I had saved up money, so it wasn't like I needed to publish within a week or be eating out of Dumpsters. There were a lot of things I did so I felt like I had a comfortable cushion."

And she examined the roadblocks, asking, "What is

Making Change: **Dahlia's 7 Crucial Points**

1. Put yourself in luck's path by focusing on what you want and taking steps to make it happen.
2. Continually scan the horizon. Over-focusing on what you "should" be doing will make you miss opportunities.
3. Staying in a job you hate can be just as risky as pursuing one you love.
4. Once you start, put all your energy and effort into making it happen.
5. When money becomes one measure of success, and not _the_ measure of success, its importance shrinks.
6. Surround yourself with people whose expectations connect to your happiness not your material success.
7. Being able to model happiness for your children outweighs anything you can buy them.

going to be so crippling that I can't work?" The first, not surprisingly, was money. So, she assumed she would "hemorrhage money for the next six months."

Another concern was how other people would view her. One of Lithwick's biggest challenges was stepping out of the high-pay, high-status world. She took a radical path: isolating herself from her law-firm friends. "It's hard if you are constantly surrounded by people against whom to measure yourself," she says. "It's like leaving a cult when you're still sleeping at the cult."

Despite the preparation and her love of her new vocation, financially it was challenging. "I lived on ramen noodles," she recalls. "It was a really, really hard time."

Surprisingly, Lithwick describes herself as more risk averse than most. "I always wanted things mapped out and clear. The idea of being in a financial, professional free fall scared me, but the really risky thing would have been staying in a profession I hated. The risk was my health, and my relationships and my spiritual life continuing to decline indefinitely. Taking a year off and possibly living in poverty for that year just didn't seem nearly as dangerous as being profoundly unhappy."

Turning **Point**

In the end, it was a close call. "I ran out of money, and by June 1999 things were looking bad."

Then, the online publication Slate was looking for a lawyer/writer to cover the Microsoft trial. "I was in Washington, D.C., visiting the friend of a friend of someone who worked at Slate. It was complete serendipity. I got a call saying, 'If you can be at the Microsoft trial tomorrow morning at nine o'clock, you can cover it for a couple days.'" She stayed on, eventually becoming a full-time editor in September 2001.

"I was so in the right place at the right time," she says. "And that is the nature of following your passion. You will get yourself to the right place at the right time."

As her work at Slate continued, Lithwick found her metric for success beginning to shift. As she puts it, "The problem with commodifying it in terms of money, is that there is no such thing as 'enough money.' There's always a way to justify needing more. And with happiness it's the opposite."

But in our society, "money is easily measured, so it becomes a quick and dirty proxy." How much money someone makes "seems to be determinative of a million things – how happy they are, how important they are, etc. It seems like a proxy for a lot, but it's really a prison. Once you get into that prison, it takes on a life for itself. The Zen version is this constantly open mouth. It eats and eats and eats, yet it's never satisfied. The more it eats, the more it is fundamentally unsatisfiable."

As Lithwick's perspective shifted, money's hold over her diminished. "I was able to say that this can't be the only yardstick I use. And if it's not going to be the only yardstick I use, it kind of shrinks down. So now I can say, look, this is a worry. It's not easy...but it's the right shape and size."

Part of her journey has been surrounding herself with people with similar values, including her husband, Aaron Fein, a former architect who also left behind his "professional" career to pursue his passion for art. Fein, whom she married after changing careers, understands "that the single most important thing is that both people be happy on Monday morning," says Lithwick. "If I had married someone who was like, 'If you were an attorney right now we'd be making a quarter million dollars a year,' it would be much harder."

She continues to find new opportunities. Together with Brandt Goldstein, she published a humorous book of contracts titled *Me vs. Everybody* (Workman Press 2003), and recently she wrote a series of seven columns in the *New York Times*.

Eventually, her philosophy started to unfold – and trickle down to the next generation. "Everyone is entitled to soar," says Lithwick. "It's funny, because now we're thinking about what we want for our son. And that's it – to have two parents who are soaring. Whether we make a ton of money or have a boat or can send him to soccer camp is on the sidelines. What matters is to see people who are happy. Why wouldn't a kid grow up to soar themselves if they see that modeled?" W

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