

FOR YOUR PRACTICE

LAWYERS CONCERNED FOR LAWYERS

Losing ‘real self’ along career path

Q: Though my father and siblings just about got through high school and are in the trades (some of them doing quite well; for example, my electrician brother), I somehow became more of an academic type and landed at a prestigious college, where I constantly felt like a fraud and was amazed to make it to graduation without anyone catching on.

For lack of any other ideas, like a number of my peers, I applied to law schools, did quite well on the LSAT, and spent the next three years at a highly regarded institution that brought me to pressured life at a law firm.

Even in this work life, and even though no one has complained about my work, I still feel like I’m faking it and that at some point will be found out. As I present my aggressive, assured professional self to my clients and colleagues, I might as well be on stage in a play, including the stage fright, because I’m constantly anxious and have lately experienced what I think are panic attacks.

Had I not been admitted to that college, I’d probably be a carpenter now, and maybe more comfortable in my own skin, but I can’t ignore the trajectory created by the academic privileges I’ve been given.

My wife, who herself has a high-powered career in a university setting, has urged me to get on anxiety-reducing



medications; it’s hard to believe that pills could solve this problem, but I’d appreciate your input.

A: You touch on a familiar theme, that of feeling like a fraud, of having been vaulted into an unfamiliar setting of increased status and “great expectations” to which you feel you don’t naturally belong. It may seem as if, in boarding that career train, you left behind your sense of making and “owning” your own decisions. If adopting a “persona” apropos of your new role, perhaps you left your real self “off stage,” lingering behind the

curtain, out of sight and out of mind, but stirring up a sense of uncomfortable inauthenticity.

Those who are blessed with significantly above-average talents sometimes experience an ironic combination of grandiose mission (e.g., “Someone with my college pedigree and exceptional LSATs has a special destiny.”) and self-doubt (e.g., “I don’t belong here”). These conflicting feelings usually pertain more to one’s sense of personal identity and preferences than to one’s actual talents and abilities, and may be a significant contributing factor to your anxiety. Once you are able to more fully know, accept and act in accordance with your truest self, your anxiety may abate to the point that you discover that you either really enjoy law firm life, or that you prefer something completely different. If you were to find, for example, that carpentry was more satisfying to you than your current profession, you could consider making that change — if you could tolerate the financial sacrifice.

However, even within the law there may be more desirable matches.

Obviously, psychotherapy (aka counseling) is well suited for the process of ongoing self discovery, since within that setting genuineness and honesty are encouraged, and there is no need to impress or please the therapist. As you become

more self aware, your reactions and personal aims may be easier to recognize and to accept. Medication, as your wife has mentioned, may be effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety; the medications that produce the quickest and strongest effects also have the potential to create a dependency, but can nevertheless be helpful if needed. Finally, a career coach or counselor might provide more active assistance in identifying/exploring/pursuing concrete career changes (and LCL can provide such a referral, if indicated). Of course, vocational preferences must be carefully and realistically examined in the current economy and fluctuating job market, but it sounds as if your wife is doing well enough in her field to give you some financial latitude. If you decide to explore this further, LCL can offer some initial assistance in determining where you might like to begin.

Questions quoted are either actual letters/e-mails or paraphrased and disguised concerns expressed by individuals seeking assistance from Lawyers Concerned for Lawyers. Questions for LCL may be mailed to LCL, 31 Milk St., Suite 810, Boston, MA 02109; e-mailed to email@lclma.org or called in to (617) 482-9600. LCL’s licensed clinicians will respond in confidence. Visit LCL online at www.lclma.org. ■