



Why I tossed out my law degree

By Marcia Walker, *The Globe and Mail*, 2012

Most lawyers hang their law degrees over an imposing rosewood desk. I hung mine over the basement toilet.

My husband would shake his head every time he came out of the crapper, and urge me to move it somewhere more dignified. "It's so sad," he said. "You don't value it."

"What do you mean?" I replied. "It's the perfect place for it."

He was right, of course.

When I looked at my degree, all I saw was years of wasted effort, and time I would never get back.

I knew I hated law school after the first month, but stuck it out because it was a clear path and I was tired of feeling lost. Besides, I loved telling people I was in law school. It was impressive. I was going places.

So I told the voice inside me that was bored and depressed to suck it up.

At the end of first year, I had the perfect out: I was pregnant. After my son was born, I could have easily left law, but I didn't. No way. That would have meant I didn't know what I was doing, and I was convinced I had a plan.

Instead, I laced my way through courses on business organizations and real-estate law. Sometimes I napped.

The following year, I had my daughter. Law school became a retreat, a reprieve from the wailing and mucus of my living room.

There was no question of quitting now, and I attacked my classes with renewed vigour. I was going to be a lawyer, damn it!

I threw myself into extracurricular activities, working at a poverty clinic, volunteering on civil-liberties cases and even joining up for the law school book club.

It didn't matter to me that I didn't like the work. I was over that. What mattered was that I stay on track. My last year of law school was a blur of kids' birthday parties and desperate late-night searches for exam outlines.

During that time, I developed a chronic eye twitch. My right eyelid spontaneously broke out in spasms several times a day.

My husband suggested (gently, oh so gently) that I wasn't happy. Maybe law wasn't my thing.

I explained to him (there may have been some yelling) how crucially important it was that I finish law school. If I didn't graduate, I would resent the kids for stealing away my brilliant law career. That's right. I was doing it for the children.

My eye twitch got worse.

During my articling year, I started to unravel. I couldn't focus during the day, and then I would panic when I got home, pulling all-nighters to catch up.

I started crying more, hiding in the bathroom stall at work, hoping no one would notice. I kept emergency concealer in my pocket to cover the redness around my eyes. When that didn't work, I told my co-workers I had severe allergies.

On the day of my call to the bar, my husband and I talked seriously of separating. For the first time in weeks, I didn't cry. I felt nothing (unless confusion is an emotion).

How had my path, the one I had meticulously followed, left me so hollow and burned out? I accepted my certificate and decided to take some time off.

Over the next few years, I pieced my life back together. I discovered I still had a marriage. I discovered I still liked a part of myself, especially when I followed my genuine interests. I took up photography because it felt good, not because it looked good on my résumé.

Sometimes I thought about law in the vague way one thinks about an old, lost sweater. Where did that go?

My law degree gathered dust in the washroom, but it still had its uses. I still told people I was a lawyer. I was just on a break, a long break.

When my law society invoice arrived in the mail every year, I paid it so I could legitimately say I was a lawyer. I still hadn't reconciled who I was with who I thought I wanted to be.

In the spring, my then-nine-year-old daughter and I were cleaning up the basement for a summer renovation. We needed to take everything off the walls.

I took down my law degree and held it in my hands. It was six years since I had practised. My daughter stood behind me and asked me what I was doing.

"Just looking at my law degree," I said.

"Mom?" She hesitated before she went on. "Are you a lawyer? Like, if my friends ask."

"Mmmn, yeah, sure. Technically."

She stared at me, a tiny but thorough therapist. She didn't care either way; she just wanted a straight answer and, for the first time, so did I.

“No.”

It came out as an exhale. “I thought I wanted to be one, but I was wrong.”

I packed the frame with my other degrees and called the law society a few days later to surrender my licence.

It took me six years to let go of my law career. When the official form came in the mail, my hands shook – not with fear, but relief.

As moments go, it was more fulfilling than any ceremony with hundreds of people. But then, for the first time in years, I wasn't trying to impress anyone.