

Murray Hill Institute

Women Transforming Culture

Newsletter
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Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

It's hard to believe that almost a year has passed since our ***Woman, Beauty & Image*** conference took place in New York City. As with our other conferences, this event provided valuable information and opened horizons for women to carry out the task of transforming culture in positive, constructive ways. I would like to share with you some of the initiatives that were spawned from the conference. After reading about them, you too may be inspired to do something similar yourself.

You may remember the teen volunteers who acted as hostesses at the conference. Well, three of them were so inspired by what they saw and heard that they decided to take the message to their peers. They launched "Fashion Forum," whose mission is to help young women make a difference in today's society by promoting a dignified image of women. They achieve this through activism and through monthly events such as discussion, guest speakers, and hands-on workshops for young women. Murray Hill Institute is proud to sponsor the activities of "Fashion Forum," and we invite our readership to collaborate with this initiative through professional and/or financial support.

The ripple effect of the conference has extended far and wide. Several of the women who attended decided to hold similar events in their cities, thus reaching a wider radius of people. Fashion seminars were organized in

Portland, Denver, Milwaukee, St. Louis, and on Long Island, to name a few. Minette, who traveled from the Philippines to attend the conference, has been very busy giving seminars in Manila, Cebu, and other cities in her country, making good use of the material posted on our website. These are just some of the initiatives we have heard about; surely there are many more.

Our upcoming conference on Saturday, April 22, ***A Person-Centered Approach to Work-Life Balance***, promises to be another thought-provoking and action-oriented event. The number of newspaper and magazine articles on the topic of work-life balance indicate that this is an issue of interest and concern for both women and men in the workplace. Our conference speakers will provide participants with the information and tools they need to determine their needs, obligations, and priorities. Our feature article provides examples of some work-life balance challenges and how they were met.

We hope to see you on April 22!

Kind regards,
Kathleen McGarry
President

Feature Article

How They Did It
By Alice Trimmer

"I could do it, but I know how it would be—we'd end up eating takeout every night, and I don't want Jacob to have a heart attack before he's 40." Joanne, shortly after the birth of her first

daughter, was mulling over possible scenarios that might result from juggling a demanding job in publishing while caring for her growing family. The solution she eventually chose—giving up a promising managerial position and working freelance for awhile in order to gain scheduling flexibility, seemed risky at the time, but fourteen years later, both career and family are thriving.

Over nearly four decades of working in a corporate setting I have watched with respect and awe many women raise strong families while building active careers. How do they do it? How do they clarify their priorities? To whom do they turn for advice? To find answers, I interviewed several women who are raising families while holding down demanding careers in large corporate environments.

Melding family and corporate life is not easy. Anne, Vice-President and Managing Editor at a large educational publisher and mother of a 15-year-old boy, rises at 4 am in order to put in a 10-hour day at the office, from 6 am to 4 pm. This demanding schedule has a payoff: no work at home, and she has resisted getting a BlackBerry so that she can use the commute home as a transitional period to de-stress from work. Others routinely pull out the laptop for an hour or two of work after the children are in bed, a daunting prospect that enables them to keep in check the hours that they have to be physically present in the office.

The experiences of these women can help anyone faced with the need to get control of working hours, whether it is to help care for aging parents, adapt to their own changing health and energy needs, or carve out time for a graduate degree.

Communicate Your Needs

Cynthia, an inventory manager in an educational publishing company, who has 8- and 10-year-old sons, juggled conference calls and strategizing during a brief time when her younger son was having surgery. Realizing the challenges of working from a distance, she asked for—and received—a laptop. When this raised eyebrows among her co-workers (“How come we don’t have one?”), she encouraged them to ask for the same, if they needed it. Soon, all the inventory managers had laptops, and this saved substantial time and money for the department when the company was closed for a week during the Republican National Convention. The week of the convention coincided with the opening of school in most parts of the country, one of the busiest times of year for the inventory department. Because of Cynthia’s son’s tonsillectomy, the entire department was able to work from home and take care of business as usual at this critical time.

Polite persistence pays: Joanne’s initial request for extra time off when her first daughter was born was met with a chilly reception (“I didn’t take off extra time, why should you?”) but she took it anyway, as unpaid leave, and the job survived.

The need to communicate one’s needs is equally critical at home. Isabella is a senior technical specialist for a large telecommunications company, and mother of 8- and 10-year old boys. She also takes care of her mother one day each weekend and has realized that her all-male household needs gentle reminders from time to time. “Sometimes my kids and husband get into that ‘mom does everything’ mode. It is ok to let them feel the net effect of mom working by having them pitch in more.”

Create Your Own Compass

For many women, the initial decision to keep working or take a break is relatively easy, dictated by or made possible by economic factors, availability of family help, husband's work schedule, and/or their own perceptions and expectations. What is often harder is dealing with the small day-to-day decisions, perceiving or experiencing small missed opportunities in both family life and at work. To guide themselves through this, they use the same problem-solving and analytic skills that they have developed on the job, partnered with a healthy dose of intuition. "I work on instinct and weighing the information received," says Isabella. Joanne watches her daughters, now 12 and 14, for clues. If she feels they need more of her time, she cuts back.

How many hours of work are too many? To what extent is it possible to cut back, even if strongly motivated to do so? The answer, not surprisingly, owes more to the nature of the job rather than official company policies. Kim, a Business Support Manager for a large bank, who has a daughter, 4, and a son, 7, says, "I struggle with how much time to put into my job and career and it is something I still wrestle with. I used to put in 50-60 hours a week. I saw that people who were moving up in the corporation routinely did the same. But now I see that I am able to accomplish what I need to within the working day, with an occasional hour or two at home after the kids are in bed." For Daniela, Vice President and Editorial Director for an educational publisher and mother of a four-year-old son, job responsibilities have proved more intrusive. "I try to compartmentalize time at work (8:30 am to 7 pm) and time at home. This does not always work. I've tried to confine my work at home to reading email and

reviewing manuscripts. After he goes to bed I work about an hour each night, and a few hours over the weekend. If I don't work on the weekend, I feel guilty and behind when Monday morning comes." Daniela had to travel extensively after her product was launched last year, and then it was a case of minimizing the damage. She tries to restrict her nights away to no more than four in a row, avoiding weekends, and when possible, plans something special such as a stay with grandparents so that her son is somewhat distracted from her absence.

Kim's and Daniela's companies both made *Working Mother* magazine's "100 Best Companies" list for 2005. Both companies have a full complement of programs such as flextime and telecommuting to help families cope. But factors such as understaffing and out-of-control schedules can undermine the best of policies.

Consider Calculated Risks

For people who do their jobs well and have marketable skills, opportunity seldom knocks only once. Sometimes it is easier to negotiate from a position outside the company than from within. ("If you want me back, here's what I need" can be more persuasive than "Here's what I need.")

Joanne moved from a full-time staff position to part-time freelance after her first daughter was born, working two or three days a week, then gradually moving up to nearly full time. When the second daughter came along, she was working full time, but again took a break, working two to four days a week. Six years ago she changed to another publisher, working four to four and a half days a week. The project that she helped develop was very successful, and she is now Director of Instruction for the Intervention Group

at a major educational publisher. Although her daughters are older now, she still leaves early one day a week so that she can share part of their day life. She worried throughout that the breaks she took would look odd on her resume, assuming they would prejudice future employers, but in fact this had not happened.

Anne also took a short break of about one year when her son was born, and moved back from freelance to staff. In addition, she turned down a vice-presidency six years ago because the new job would involve too much travel and much longer hours. However, her responsibilities continued to expand, and three years later, her own position was upgraded to vice president.

Where do we go from here?

Without doubt, gains have been made in improving company policies that assist working families. Nonetheless, current marketplace issues can work against taking full advantage of these policies. Downsizing of staffs, corporate mergers, and layoffs that often seem arbitrary have increased employee anxiety and reduced the impetus to take even small risks with a career. Managers are contending with smaller staffs, intense market competition, and demands for increased productivity from those higher up in the corporation. This can make them less receptive to any perceived threat to achieving departmental goals, such as an employee requesting leave. Even if they are basically sympathetic to the need for family time, their own job responsibilities often leave them with little time to facilitate creative work-life solutions for their staff.

Managers throughout the chain of command in corporations need to be more pro-active in supporting the real-

life consequences of putting corporate policies into action. This means examining carefully their own interactions with their employees and making sure that the subtle forms of psychological blackmail that can flourish in workaholic environments are avoided. Employees need to be assured that they are asking for rights, rather than privileges, when they make efforts to ensure reasonable working hours and sufficient time for their families. A good first step for many managers would be to meet individually with each of the young mothers on their staff and ask what they can do to support them in keeping their hours on the job within reasonable boundaries. The creative problem solving that would take place may well result in solutions that would benefit the entire staff.

Although technological advances have fostered an overall increase in the pace of work, they have also given substantive help in getting parents physically out of the office at a reasonable hour, and reciprocally, allowing valued employees to be connected and productive even when working from home. Email is so much a part of our lives that it is hard to remember how new it is, but Joanne vividly recalls bundling up her small girls in the middle of winter to go outside to send faxes. Today, all such communications can take place from the desk chair. It is easy to see, on the other hand, how the omnipresent laptop could become intrusive. Daniela tries to ensure that her weekend and evening work sessions are realistic by scheduling definite times and setting discrete, achievable goals. This prevents the "undone homework" syndrome that can ruin the entire weekend.

The “wish list” from the mothers interviewed reveals a wide arena for future progress: on-site day care, more help from managers in scheduling overdue vacation days, more help in instituting flextime, more assistance with child care expenses, better managing of work flow and schedules, a formalized policy for granting compensatory days for weekend work, summer hours, improved backup systems so that employees can take two weeks of vacation at a time, more than six weeks of pay for maternity leave, paternity leave with pay. Meanwhile, mothers in the workplace will continue to exercise the skill, common sense, and energy that has brought them success in their careers and enriched their homes.

Alice Trimmer is an editor living in New York City.

Cultural Corner

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking* (Knopf, 2005)

Reviewed by Sarah Phelps Smith

To a certain extent, all art or even all good human work involves the process of making order out of chaos. *The Year of Magical Thinking*, a recent non-fiction best seller by one of the best-known essayists and novelists of the last forty years, Joan Didion, tells the story of her journey through the year of grieving that followed the sudden death of her husband, fellow writer John Gregory Dunne, on December 30th, 2003. Didion confronts the disorder of her life with a careful hand, lining up fragmented memories and rattled emotions, seeking some kind of order within them, in order to find digestible meaning.

Although the themes of death and grieving are universal, Didion tells the

story of a particularly devastating year. The chain of events surrounding Dunne’s death is remarkable for three reasons.

First, Dunne died suddenly, instantly, with no warning (other than a history of heart-related problems which his wife had determined to be “all taken care of”—an element of her wishful thinking.) The book begins with the words, which become a *leitmotif* throughout:

Life changes fast.

Life changes in the instant.

You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.

The second of the unusual conditions of this death is that not only were Joan Didion and John Dunne husband and wife, but they were collaborators in their work of writing. They both worked at home. They reviewed and critiqued each other’s work. When Didion was finally able to write after Dunne’s death she mentions that it was the first thing she had written in years that he was unable to edit for her.

The third and most amazing particular of her experience is that at the time of Dunne’s death, their only daughter lay in a coma in a nearby hospital. She had developed toxic shock around Christmas Day, and had to be induced into a coma in order to put her on life support. Her father died the evening of December 30th after the couple had just returned from their visit to the hospital. When the daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne, does emerge from her coma some two weeks later, Didion must tell her of her father’s death—more than once, because she is not able to take it in. In the next few months Quintana returns to two different hospitals due to a pulmonary embolism and then a cerebral

hematoma. Didion as a widow is not given the time and space to grieve properly because so much of her attention is taken up with the care and worry of her daughter. Grief for her husband and best friend is necessarily deferred—and yet has to be dealt with—while she is completely wrapped up in a situation that is the cause of more grief. She lives with the necessity to avoid any place, thought, or person that will remind her of her husband or her daughter, a feat that proves time and again to be impossible.

Quintana developed another health problem the month the book went to press. She went into the hospital with pancreatitis and died August 26, 2005 at 39. This final event is not mentioned in the book or its jacket; the author did not choose to revise the book after it went to press to include it. She is not writing for sympathy or publicity, but to understand the cataclysmic event in her own life, and to share it with others.

Didion moves through the months following her husband's sudden death, experiencing various stages of denial, re-creating her own identity without her closest friend, lover and colleague, while living through an especially heroic stage as mother—moving from Manhattan for three months in California after her daughter's brain surgery. She becomes a kind of emotional archeologist, searching for meaning in these overwhelming events. She sifts through everything her husband said in the recent past—measuring the significance, searching for meaning. She contemplates such artifacts as the grocery list left on the counter the day of her daughter's brain surgery. She is unable to part with her husband's shoes, as he might need them if he comes back. Towards the end of the

book she acknowledges, "I realize that since the last morning of 2003, the morning after he died, I had been trying to reverse time, run the film backward."

Along with Didion's close and tender observation of reality and human nature, one of her gifts is to organize and maintain control of her literary voice. *The Year of Magical Thinking* is Didion's attempt to collect the pieces: the autopsy report, everything said by anyone related to her husband's death, the events of their marriage as she looks back to see their life together as a completed story. At a time when she thought she "could not trust [herself] to present a coherent face to the world," she occupied herself by organizing her collection of magazines. She says, "Stacking magazines seemed at that point the limit of what I could do by way of organizing my life." But she starts somewhere, with a small reachable goal, rather than just putting her head under the covers.

John Gregory Dunne is pictured several times in the book as re-reading books he likes to "see how they work." The structure in this book seems to be almost stream of consciousness, as we follow the complicated and anguished thoughts of her first months. Yet there are several motifs and themes that re-appear. These gauzy layers of narrative overlap without obscuring each other. The book is partly organized chronologically, as we follow the health crises of Quintana. Interweaving with the real happenings of the year are memories of the life Didion and Dunne shared for almost forty years. The memories break into the narrative as various random circumstances remind Didion of earlier days. At times the memories and their life together seem more real than the difficult circumstances of 2004. She

wrestles with guilt, thinking that she should have thought of a way to save her husband's life.

She seeks comfort and knowledge ("information is control") in books on death and grieving by psychologists, but seems to find more comfort in literature. One recurring *motif* is from *Gawain and the Green Knight*, where Gawain somehow foresees his death. As Didion recalls comments from her husband in the weeks preceding his death she then quotes "*I tell you that I shall not live two days, Gawain said.*" "*Full fathom five thy Father lies*" from *The Tempest* comes to her mind, as she needs to tell her daughter of her father's death. Of the non-fiction books she consults, the one that seems to offer her the most valuable advice is her old copy of Emily Post's book of etiquette. The advice there is practical, to take broth to the bereaved. As part of Didion's character is to behave according to certain rules of society, knowing the correct thing to do seems to be comforting—it is too bad that the advice is for those visiting the bereaved rather than for the grieving themselves.

There is a secondary subject in the book, one that is probably not even recognized by its author. While describing the experience of bereavement, weighted heavily with memories of her life with her husband, a portrait of a wonderful marriage appears and develops.

In her struggle to observe what was happening to her, and to organize her thoughts, Didion's vision as a writer may have helped her to survive the year. By baring her soul in this most personal of books, Joan Didion has given the world a great gift. Her experience, particular as it is, could help any person who has to cope with

the loss of a loved one through death—an experience that every human being must face at some point. Her "magical thinking"—the denial of the truth and desire for this thing "not to have happened"—gives way to her slow but determined effort to organize her thoughts, to allow the truth of her situation to become part of her life and to start seeing a future for herself under new circumstances. "I know that if we are to live ourselves, there comes a point at which we must relinquish the dead, let them go, keep them dead."

Sarah Phelps Smith, Ph.D., is an art historian who lectures, writes, and leads tours to Italy.

News *Culture and Core Beliefs Series*

Last November, Hadley Arkes, the Edward Ney Professor of Jurisprudence at Amherst College, inaugurated the Culture and Core Beliefs Series with a lecture "The Common Sense of Natural Law." The series, a new initiative by Murray Hill Institute, aims to show the interrelationship between core beliefs and various aspects of our social, political, and cultural understanding and practice.

The second lecture in the series took place at Murray Hill Place on Friday evening, February 3, 2006, by Dr. Michael Baur, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Fordham University and Adjunct Professor of Law at Fordham's Law School. The title of his lecture was "What Part Does Justice Play in Natural Law and Natural Rights?" In his lecture Dr. Baur referred to the tradition of Thomas Aquinas which maintains that an unjust law is no law at all. This Thomistic proposition has been explained by John Finnis, a

proponent of natural law theory from Oxford. Natural law can be interpreted as either a legal theory or a moral theory. Finnis himself distinguishes between legal obligation or validity and moral obligation or validity. With this distinction, one could hold that iniquitous rules have legal validity, since Aquinas's dictum regarding unjust laws as no laws at all, and with which no compliance would be necessary, might give way to anarchy in a given society. Finnis does maintain however that natural law legal theory should be linked to natural law moral theory such that there be a necessary connection between law and moral obligation. If, for example, driving on the left side is legalized, there would be a moral obligation to abide by the rule or the law enforced by the authorities and thus we would defer to the authorities in such a matter. We would in fact follow the law for the common good.

Dr. Baur spoke of the order of justice as set up by those in charge of the community. He did however say that rights are not only a matter of legal positing and of convention but also of natural law. When injustice occurs, when something is owed to someone or rights have been violated, the harm must always be traced back to human, moral agency.

Some interesting questions followed the presentation regarding unjust laws during the Nazi regime and the role of human reason in knowing our rights and obligations from natural law.

Evenings of Conversation for Young Professionals

As part of its Mentoring Program, Murray Hill Institute sponsors periodic evenings of conversation for women who are in the early stages of their professional lives. Invited speakers share their experiences and advice in a

brief talk, followed by informal discussion. Speakers from last fall and winter were Maureen Morris and Diane Spizzirro, Consultants for the Success Image Career Center, speaking about "Relationships at Work" and Maureen Scannel Batemen, Partner at Holland & Knight, LLP, speaking on "Making Choices in Personal and Professional Life."

Events scheduled for the spring include Terri Carron, Fashion Consultant, speaking on "Fashion Fundamentals" on March 29, 2005 and Christine L. Lay, MD, speaking on "Women's Health and Wellness" on May 24, 1006. All events are held at Murray Hill Place, 243 Lexington Avenue. For further information, contact info@murrayhillinstitute.org

Spring Conference: A Person-Centered Approach to Work-Life Balance

Even the most energetic and organized will profit from Murray Hill Institute's fifth conference, *A Person-Centered Approach to Work-Life Balance*, to be held at the Union League Club on Saturday, April 22, 2006. An exceptional panel of speakers will share their research and experiences in helping persons analyze their own professional and personal needs and become more pro-active in helping their managers and co-workers effect change. Biographies of conference speakers Ellen Galinsky, Jessica DeGroot, and Mary Hunt, conference schedule, and registration information are available on the Murray Hill Institute Web site, www.murrayhillinstitute.org