

DRI for Life: A Wake Up Call

By Sarah E. Madsen

Growing up as the daughter of an independent, hard-working single mother, I was routinely reminded that “I could do anything I set my mind to do.” I could achieve anything if I was hard-working, tenacious, and kind. I gave 110 percent to everything I was involved in—which was basically everything. I steadfastly refused to believe that I couldn’t multitask and simultaneously be a great wife/mother/lawyer/friend/pet owner/professional organization leader/nonprofit board member who developed business, spent quality time with my kids, walked the dog, planned galas, attended seminars, had a healthy dinner on the table at 6:30 pm... and still found time to sleep. Was I burning the candle at both ends? Yes. Probably in the middle, too.

In my Type A world, September 9, 2014, was a fairly typical day. I was six months into my new position as in-house counsel for ACT, a position that necessitated my family to relocate from Minnesota to Iowa. We were still living out of several moving boxes I had not yet found time to unpack, and we were working on establishing our new routine. We were unsettled. And it drove me crazy! I wanted nothing but a few moments to calm the chaos and get life in order (as if that was possible with two kids under the age of 3). September 9, 2014, offered no such moments because I was off to Boston to participate in a mediation at the First Circuit. I was simultaneously hauling my luggage, sprinting to a connecting flight, and responding to phone calls and emails. I was in “go mode.”

After a busy day of travel, I sat at the table in the judge’s conference room, hoping the throbbing pain that had been developing in my neck would subside with another dose of ibupro-

fen. I attempted to dismiss the pain as a pinched nerve caused by moving, air travel, or the dance party I had with my children in the living room the night before. The mediation concluded early and

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I rushed back to the airport with the hope of boarding an early flight back home.

With no earlier flight options available, I headed to the airport spa to see if a chair massage would calm the worsening pain. I prayed for relief. Instead, when I stood back up, I was light-headed and I had developed a tingling sensation in my arms and legs. By now, I recognized something wasn’t right. I purchased aspirin at the airport convenience store for fear I might be having a heart attack.

Once I eventually arrived home (14 hours later), I headed straight to the clinic. The doctor indicated that he believed I had

a pinched nerve, but was ordering an MRI to rule out the dissection of my vertebral artery. He said such a diagnosis was unlikely, but given the severity of that condition, he wanted to rule it out.

At 11:00 pm, I awoke to a call from the ordering physician. “Ms. Madsen. The MRI results are back. You are having a medical emergency. You have a dissection of your artery. You need to go to the emergency room right away. You could have a stroke any moment. Do you want me to send an ambulance?” What? “No. No ambulance. Thank you.” He instructed me not to move my head and get to the hospital right away.

I walked carefully down the hall to the kids’ rooms. The reality of potentially not seeing them again caused a flood of tears. I held my breath, so as to not wake them as I kissed and hugged them for what I prayed was not the last time. I hoped I would return home, but in that moment, nothing seemed a guarantee. A friend was on his way over to watch the kids when my phone rang again. The doctor inquired why I had not yet checked into the emergency room. He was worried. So was I.

As my husband and I headed towards the hospital, we had a conversation I never thought about having. What to do if I wasn’t around. My final wishes. Finding a new wife someday that would be a great mom to our kids. Passwords. Insurance policies. Health care directives. Telling him how much I loved him and how blessed I was to be his wife.

I spent three days in the neurology unit as teams of doctors evaluated me and ran every test imaginable. The fear of the unknown left me wide-eyed and anxiety ridden. Feeling a bit like I was admitting defeat in attempting to balance it all, I finally asked to speak with a psych nurse. I hoped she would find a



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way for me to achieve calm, or at least not feel so crazy.

It was not until I spoke with her that I realized how much of a toll my “can do” personality was taking on me. I had always thought that I *could* do it all, rather than evaluating whether I *should* do it all.

She equated life to a jar. A jar into which you put walnuts and rice. Walnuts are priorities, and rice is everything else. If you put the rice in before the walnuts—or everything else before your priorities—you won’t have room for many walnuts. But if you put your walnuts in first, you will have entirely more room for rice than you ever expected.

She asked me what my priorities were. The list was pretty short. Admittedly, nothing on the list had anything to do with working long hours, always exceeding everyone’s expectations, planning galas, making elaborate cakes for my kids’ birthdays, or getting my house unpacked. For too long I attempted to balance these tasks as if they were deserved the same level of prioritization as quality time with my family and my health.

I am grateful that I have recovered well from the dissection over time, and none of the many medical tests showed any cause for concern. At this point, the only lasting concern is committing to focusing on my priorities. In the last year I have committed to leaving the office no later than 5:15 pm. Committing to spending fewer hours at the office has resulted in my improved efficiency, drive, and morale when I am there. Admittedly, I respond to emails in the evening, but only after my kids are in bed. I have learned that I cannot be all things to all people, and I literally can’t be anything to anyone if I don’t prioritize wellness.

There is no such thing as work–life balance. It’s work–life juggling, and the more you attempt to juggle, the more difficult juggling becomes. So, from one retired Type A juggler to any others out there striving to do it all, I hope you will take a moment to “put the walnuts in first.” Just because you physically, emotionally and/or mentally *could* do it all doesn’t mean you *should*. 