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**HEADLINE:** FLEEING THE FIRM DOESN'T HAVE TO MEAN LEAVING THE LAW

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**BODY:**

I was sitting in my friend Angie's Battery Park apartment, viewing the sunset over the Hudson River, as the music of Seal played in the background. It's hard to comprehend that the events of that Saturday began, as all Saturdays did, at work in Washington, D.C.

The decision I had made that morning was at once bold and courageous, stupid and dangerous. No attorney quits without giving notice, without having a better job lined up, without really thinking, just doing.

But I had gotten to the point of no choice--I could not work at the firm another year, another week, another minute. Having realized these things, I was emotionally free. I felt better than I had in a very long time. Yet I knew the next few months were going to be terrible, perhaps among the worst of my life.

I was 30, financially almost bankrupt, unemployed, and perhaps unemployable. My mind was numb as I stared out the window, with the Seal album playing.

Three years later, walking through a record shop, I see that same CD on sale, and my mind instantly flashes to that Saturday. In retrospect, it was a day that would change everything about my life. It has taken the bulk of the last three years to fully recover. It is difficult to believe so much pain, maturity, focus, and evolution has occurred since.

This time, I buy the CD and listen to it on the way home, realizing that the decision to quit that day was perhaps the pivotal decision in my life. It was the right decision, no question. The months I spent alone, at home, before finding another job was the first time since high school I had thought about-- I mean really thought about--the direction of my life and what was actually important. The clarity of purpose that emerged from that period will serve as a guidepost for the remainder of my life.

**No Turning Back**

I see so many bright, personable young attorneys go into law firms who "never come back." When I say "never come back," I don't mean in the physical sense. I mean that their spirit often never re-

surfaces. Most don't come to the realization that they must get out until it's too late to leave. In many ways, I was fortunate that the partner and senior associate who controlled my life seemed more intolerant and unyielding than most in the legal profession.

This experience pushed me to get out early. I saw law firms as designed to have as much work performed as possible with as few people as possible. Perhaps this is no different from any other business, but at law firms there is a built-in, often demoralizing notion that not everyone can make partner. Attrition seems expected. I was fortunate that I hadn't wasted years of my life working for people who may have been counting on me to leave all along.

Many people I know may be wasting those years. I've heard people say they're young, so what's five or 10 years of sacrifice to reach the ultimate goal of partnership. But the sacrifice is much more. I don't think most ever get back to where they started emotionally. Something is gone from them that often can never be recaptured. You drive yourself hard for 10 years to the point where your life is your work. By then it is so ingrained that you can't turn the ship around.

Many partners still bill 2, 200 or 2, 400, or even 3, 000 hours. How much better are their lives now that they are partners?

It really saddens me to hear about young partners in the office consistently at 8 or 9 p.m. or on weekends. That means there's a spouse or significant other growing older--and perhaps kids growing up--without them. At this point in my life, I cannot comprehend people literally sacrificing their lives and their families for a law firm and more money. Therefore, I have to think that a lot of these people, especially the male partners, spend so much time at the office precisely to avoid their wives and kids. Perhaps that's the saddest notion of all.

### Working to Live

But my work is not my life, and I did not want to remain in an environment where that was expected of me. My work is important to me and I work hard. I enjoy most of the time I spend at work, I enjoy the challenge of work, I enjoy helping real people, I enjoy getting paid.

But my life is my incredible wife, my family, and my friends. That is life.

In writing this article, I thought about detailing the perverse hours and mental cruelty that led to suddenly quitting my job that Saturday. But it would be wasted space, since many who are reading this know exactly what I'm talking about.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not down on the legal profession. I believe you can practice law and make a good living without sacrificing your quality of life. But that combination is not often found in the very large firms. So you may have to search a little harder for the situation that fits your goals. You may not be working at a firm that your brother-in-law has ever heard of, you may be forced to set up your own solo practice, but believe me, you can practice law and have a great quality of life.

I love where I work now, and it is by no means undemanding. Recently, we were ranked by Fortune as the eighth-best company in America to work for, up from 14th the year before. That ranking

is no accident--the quality of life at Deloitte & Touche is far superior to any of the several law firms where I have been employed. The hours are reasonable, the people are friendly and respectful, and the firm is very well managed. The partners are also doing well financially.

A business that is well-managed and staffed appropriately can still be profitable and create a hospitable environment.

Indeed, large law firms are losing many of their finest attorneys every day to firms like mine for that very reason. I think the tide is turning, and many firms are realizing that staffing adjustments and reasonable work expectations can be made without sacrificing profits. But I suspect many large law firms won't realize it until they've lost a lot of their best and brightest.

I don't make as much money now as I could have. I will probably never be the superstar that many predicted in my youth. Many will say I have underachieved, given my undergraduate degree in nuclear engineering, two MIT graduate degrees, a Georgetown J.D., and an LL.M., but I am happier now than I ever have been. I will be happier tomorrow than I am today, and happier years from now than I will be tomorrow. That is the real goal of my life.

You see, if you make the decision early to put your real life first, things just get better with every step. On the other hand, if you decide when you are 23 to "invest" nine or 10 years of your life in a law firm, you may never be the same--and each year your real life will worsen.

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