

## **Second Careers**

By: Susan Carroll

Many friends, colleagues, and teachers have asked, "Why a career change to psychology?" While I understand that my transition from business management to clinical psychology may strike some as a considerable change in venue, for me it is a matter of continuity. Indeed, it was precisely the nature of my skills and orientation in the business world which made my choice to pursue a degree in psychology seem all but inevitable. Among the many aspects that comprise management, I was drawn to coaching others to handle change and helping fellow workers cope with ambiguous situations and the accompanying stresses so typical of a business environment.

However, my decision to leave behind the safety and security of a well-established career was not an easy one. By age 37, I had accomplished what many in the corporate world aspire to – a corner office nicely furnished, an administrative assistant, and a large global organization to manage. The salary wasn't too bad either. In December of 2000, I made the decision, after pondering it for a number of years. It took the diagnosis of a close friend with terminal illness, as well as her persuasive counsel, to convince me that "now," not "later" was the time to pursue my true interest.

My friends and colleagues thought I was crazy. Ironically, I felt sane for the first time in my life. My parents were mortified. My father called constantly asking about my financial situation and would remind me that I was leaving the working world nearing my peak earning potential. As one might expect, this did not help my anxiety. I plodded ahead nevertheless. By Christmas I had given my resignation and agreed to work through March 2001. I have never felt such a sense of elation and dread at the same time. Applications to graduate schools were submitted and in June I began my graduate training in a program here in the Chicago area.

Starting over has many advantages and disadvantages. The worst has been being on the bottom rung as a student; I had forgotten how difficult the student status can feel. My classmates are largely students 15 years my junior, which initially made making friends somewhat challenging as I didn't feel that I had much in common with my classmates. I quickly found that reaching out to my classmates allowed for new friendships, and I am very pleased to report that since entering my graduate program I have many friends, some I feel certain will be life-long.

Another challenge that I welcomed was the intellectual stimulation that being in the classroom provided for me. For the first time in many years, I found myself avidly reading, playing with complex ideas and engaging in stimulating discussions with classmates and professors. I felt alive through these interactions. I found myself growing and stretching in ways that I had yearned for during my corporate tenure, but had not found in the environment where I worked.

The financial liabilities that one must take by returning to school have been and perhaps remain my biggest challenge. I feel privileged in being able to return to school, but the financial changes in both my lifestyle and my sense of security have been difficult. I made careful financial plans before making the leap, but that does not dispel the sense of vulnerability one feels in making such a change. I just made the decision to keep moving and not let my own fears get the best of me. So far, so good.

If you are considering making a career change, I have a few words of advice to pass along. First, think through carefully your motivations for making a change in your career. For

example, what about the nature of the work that you are currently involved in? What would you like to change? Would a change in environment, position, or level of responsibility change the way you feel about your current line of work? What elements do you like and not like about your work? It is important for you to be honest with yourself about these issues – getting assistance from a career coach or therapist might help you process your feelings in a safe and supportive environment and help you make the best choice for you.

Secondly, be aware of the financial implications associated with your change in career. For example, will you be required to return to school, and if so, how will you finance this endeavor? Will your earning potential upon completing a career change be different, and if so, are you willing to make changes to your lifestyle and standard of living? Develop a financial plan and stick to it. Keep in mind that simplifying one's life can be very rewarding.

Lastly, know yourself well. What I mean by this is know your strengths, weaknesses and limitations. Be aware of what you can bring to your new career and know how to leverage your strengths and skills acquired from your previous career. Leveraging skills acquired from past work will help to set you apart and allow you to bring a unique perspective and knowledge to your chosen work.