

## CHAPTER 12

# WOMEN TOO BUSY TO LIVE: STOP... RECLAIM YOUR LIFE

BY JACQUELINE BURNS

It was 3:00 a.m. on a Wednesday morning. I was in the kitchen preparing vegetables for the Cajun cabbage recipe I'd have for dinner that evening. The rhythm of the chopping and shredding was almost hypnotic. The house was otherwise blissfully quiet. As I brought the knife down through the cabbage for the last time, the thought came to me that I was up early doing something that I needed to do for *myself*—for me—not my family.

How many of us have unconsciously ignored our own needs because we were too busy devoting ourselves to our families that we lost ourselves in the process? Being available to help our family is the loving thing to do. However, it is possible to become so distracted by our involvement in their lives that without realizing it, we neglect our own life. It's not until something happens that jolts us out of our trance that we awaken to find that while we were busy helping and supporting everyone else, we've put our own life on hold.

This chapter is for every woman who has been so devoted to helping her family that she has lost her sense of self and her own dreams in the process.

For more than 30 years, I was that woman. My life consisted of working,

raising my daughter, caring for my mother and developmentally disabled brother, and supporting the dreams and goals of my grandchildren. Somewhere along the line, I'd forgotten about my dreams of learning to ballroom dance, of traveling to a foreign country, and of completing the children's book series I'd started long ago. I also hadn't taken the time to develop meaningful relationships that could have led to a loving, healthy marriage.

I have no regrets about devoting myself to my family. Every moment spent serving them was motivated by my love for them, but there was a point at which I realized that I was so focused on my family that I was completely unaware of what was missing in my own life. My joy in seeing them happy and fulfilled blinded me to the truth that I needed to make room for the creation of a life of my own. I was loving them, but neglecting me. It was time for me to acknowledge the cold, hard truth: thirty years had passed without me pursuing the dreams in my heart. It was time for me to examine how I'd allowed my dreams to slip away from me.

## **HOW I GOT THERE**

I was 23, divorced, and raising my daughter alone. I had dreams of creating a better life for us. If I wasn't working two jobs, I was working and going to school. I knew what I wanted and I was focused on making it happen. Then, as it does for so many women, the responsibilities outside of my own home began to grow. One piled on top of the next until they became mountainous.

The Social Security Administration assigned financial responsibility for my mother and brother's benefits to me. My oldest brother, who was 34 at the time, was developmentally disabled. According to psychological assessments, he had the mind of a ten-year-old. He loved to laugh, and he called me Jack. Whether on the phone or in person, he always affectionately greeted me with an upbeat, "Hey Jack." Along with taking care of his finances, I took him shopping, to the barbershop, to movies, and did whatever else he needed.

My other brother was nine years older than me, but he, too, needed my help. After returning from the Army, he began abusing alcohol. When Children's Services threatened to take his six-year-old son from him, he

prevailed upon me to raise him. I was happy to do it because, after all, he was family.

A few months before I took custody of my nephew, I'd entered college and sometimes had to take my daughter to school with me for an 8:00 o'clock Saturday class. I'd make a palette at the top of the lecture hall so she could sleep while I took notes. Juggling my classes and my responsibilities at home became infinitely more challenging when my nephew came to live with us. Around the same time, it became apparent that my mother needed more help budgeting her money, so I began doing her weekly grocery shopping and making sure that she had a reasonable amount of spending money. As the responsibilities of my family mounted higher and higher, I began to lose control of my own health. I was in my thirties by then. I had entered college at a lean, firm, and shapely 136 pounds. However, with the added responsibility I blew up to over 200 pounds. I wasn't taking the time to eat properly, to exercise, or get enough sleep. Anyone who knew me could have seen the toll all of this was taking on me physically, but I still hadn't woken up to what was happening.

By the time my daughter became an adult, I was full throttle and out of control with feelings of responsibility for helping my family. Here's what I mean. My daughter was working, but decided to take an evening class to add to her skill set. Even though she hadn't asked me for my help, I offered to support her by staying with my seven-year-old grandson while she went to class. In order to do this for her, I would leave work and travel nearly twenty miles—in the opposite direction of home—through rush hour traffic to get to her. Instead of staying at her apartment where I could rest, I'd entertain my grandson by taking him to the local Barnes and Noble. Afterwards, I'd make the long drive home and arrive around 9 p.m. – completely exhausted from a sixteen-hour day.

Let me ask you a question: Do you recognize this woman? Does any of this sound familiar? Is this you? Like so many of us, I wanted to support my adult child's dreams. I wanted to be an involved grandmother who provided my grandson with rich experiences and an abundance of love. I had the right ideas and motives, and I would never suggest to anyone that they should not be there for their family. What I had to learn was that helping my family didn't have to translate into overloading myself to the point that I neglected my own needs.

My wake-up call came in the form of an old photo and a journal entry. I had been arranging some old photos when I came upon the one that I often used to show friends what I looked like with my hair braided. I smiled, remembering a very different time in my life. I remembered wearing the jeans, the t-shirt, and even the Avon Cherry Jubilee lipstick that was my favorite. In the picture, I saw the sparkle in my eyes and my joyous smile. All of it gave me a warm glow inside until I turned the photo over to see if I'd dated it. To my surprise, it had been twenty-four years since that picture was taken. I was so shocked about all the time that had passed since I looked so young and hopeful that I wrote about the picture in my journal. Here's the entry from that day:

April 6, 2007

Until today the picture had evoked pleasant memories. I kept it where it could be easily accessed in order to show friends how I looked with my hair styled in French braids.

I'd looked at it many times over the years without checking the back for a date. Today, I decided to turn it over to see if it had a date on it. There it was—November 1982! The energy within me shifted. I froze. I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing. November 1982. "My God, this was twenty-four years ago!" As my body became nearly catatonic, my mind reeled turbulently, and the only clear thoughts I could muster were the usual clichés: "Where did the years go? How did I let this happen?"

As quickly as the smiles had come, they left. The photo of a younger, firmer, more vibrant me became a bold indictment of years of living half a life...one more day, week, month, year of the constant beat that had become my life—a life of being tired all the time due to taking care of everyone but myself. My family's needs always came first. The sudden torrent of emotions was so overpowering that I collapsed in the over-stuffed chair behind me.

It was as though I had been awakened from a long, deep sleep. There it was in bold print: November 1982. The date loomed as a cruel reminder of years of not pursuing my deepest desires. It was an unforgiving attestation of youth taken for granted—the assumption that there would always be another opportunity. The only animated part of my body was my right arm, which was holding the photo. It extended the photo away from my body just long enough for me to feel relief from the painful truth I was facing, then just as efficiently as the arm had extended, it returned in lever-like fashion for another close examination of the date. I repeated this ritual until I heard myself utter the words spoken by Tim Robbins' character in *The Shawshank Redemption*, "It's time to get busy living or get busy dying."

I had no idea how much I needed that wake-up call, but it jolted me out of three decades of doing too much for everyone but not enough for myself.

I've been living ever since!

If you have been lured away from a life of your own by the seductive call of taking on too much responsibility for your family, this chapter is your wake-up call, and it's time to help you reclaim your life.

## HOW TO RECLAIM YOUR LIFE

To get my life back, I made three major changes that I refer to as *shifts*. I believe that if you make these same three major shifts, you will get your life back as well. To reclaim your life, you must: *shift your place in line, shift your level of commitment to your dreams, and shift the way you see time.*

### **A. Shift your place in line so that you become the most important person in your life.**

At first that may sound selfish, but really it isn't. With you as the most important person in your life, you will do everything in your power to make sure that you have what you need to always be at your best. When you are at your best, you can serve others from a place of fullness. One way to stay full is to ask yourself two essential questions when faced with a decision on whether or not to help someone.

1. In order to assist the person who needs my help, what will I have to give up in my own life?
2. If I give that thing up, what are the consequences?

Let's say that your Aunt June is moving to a new apartment, and she's asked for your help on Saturday afternoon. What would you have to give up to do that? Are you giving up time that you have to spare, or is that time you've set aside for some needed reflection and renewal? If the answer is that you need that time for yourself, it would be best to let Aunt June know that although you won't be able to help her move, perhaps you could spend a couple of hours with her helping her get organized after the move. If you really *want* to help, find a way that works for you. Save your energy for the right opportunity, for when you can be at your best. Everyone around you benefits when you've taken care of number one—you!

What action can you take today that will *shift* your needs to the front of the line?

## **B. Shift your level of commitment to *your* dreams.**

You keep your commitments to your family. Why won't you keep your commitments to yourself? If you say you're going to start saving a certain amount of money—do it! If you say you're going to walk 30 minutes a day five days a week—do it! Those tasks can seem overwhelming, but break each goal into tiny pieces, set milestone goals, and don't forget to reward yourself at the milestones you set! Maybe you'd like to cross skydiving off of your bucket list. Take the first step, contact a skydiving instructor. Have you been wanting to take that dream vacation, but find it hard to save for it? Download a savings app on your phone that allows you to round up all of the purchases you make with your debit or credit card. Before you know it, you'll have painlessly saved enough money to do something you've always wanted to do. Imagine the possibilities if you did just one small thing each day to get you closer to achieving your goals and dreams!

What commitment to yourself do you need to make good on—today?

## **C. Shift the way you see time.**

Instead of seeing each day as having 24 hours, *shift* your perception to seeing each day as having 1440 minutes. I call this the 1440 Rule. I created it as a way to make myself do what I didn't want to do, but needed to do—like exercise. To get myself to walk when I don't want to, I'll say “There's 1440 minutes in a day, you mean to tell me you aren't willing to use 15 of them to go for a walk?” Fifteen was the number of minutes I would commit to when I'd stopped walking and wasn't motivated. I'd start small and increase over time. When you look at that large number of 1440 minutes and compare it to 15, 20, 30, how can you not do what you need to do? I mean seriously!

To what important task can you apply the 1440 Rule? Do it now!

As you apply these changes to your life, remember that for years you've ignored your life. There is no quick fix for that. You must be patient with yourself, but more importantly—be patient with the process. You've embarked on a journey—the destination being

a wonderful life of your own. I'm confident that if you see the reclaiming of your life as an exciting journey, you will find the same or even greater satisfaction in creating joyful experiences for yourself as you did for your family.



## About Jacqueline

Jacqueline Burns is a certified business and life coach in the area of leadership development. She specializes in equipping and empowering women to reclaim their lives and reconnect with the dreams they've laid aside. A key component of her work with her clients is teaching them that in order to enhance the quality of their lives, they must learn how to treat themselves as if they matter. Her mantra is, "Women must learn to keep themselves full—to stop running on empty."

As an experienced coach, Jacqueline works alongside her clients to help them develop strategies that move their life forward to the achievement of their specific goals. With over a decade of experience, she has observed patterns that hold people back and has created programs of personal growth, self-leadership, and spiritual transformation to help them eliminate self-defeating patterns and experience lasting change.

Jacqueline's focus is on helping women break out of what's holding them back from living the life of their dreams. In her mastermind courses and seminars, she teaches women how to take action right where they are—regardless of circumstances. Using timeless wisdom, proven leadership principles, and insights from the field of human potential, Jacqueline engages, enlightens, and empowers women to take ownership of their life.

Jacqueline holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and a Master of Arts in Educational Administration. She is the CEO of JBurns and Associates, a coaching company specializing in personal growth and leadership development, and is a co-author with Jack Canfield in his new book, *Mastering the Art of Success*, to be released in Spring 2017.

Jacqueline is unmarried and lives in Dallas, Texas.

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