Including advice on financial planning, negotiating for time off, and reentering the work force—from those who have done it

TIME OFF FROM WORK

USING SABBATICALS TO ENHANCE YOUR LIFE WHILE KEEPING YOUR CAREER ON TRACK

LISA ANGOWSKI ROGAK

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Introduction

"So, what do you do all day, anyway?"

The questioner was a new acquaintance whom I had met at a booksigning. When I told him I had written several other books and had several more due in the next year, he became curious about what writers actually do with their days.

"You must write twelve hours a day, right?"

I took a deep breath and set out to burst his bubble.

"Well, no," I responded. "I get up when I want—usually around eight or nine, make a pot of coffee, read for an hour or two, and maybe answer a few phone calls. Then I'll do some work outside and go for a run. The mail will have come by that point, so I'll read that. If anything needs my immediate attention, I'll make a few phone calls or write a letter. Then I'll make dinner and spend the evening reading and figuring out what I'm going to do the next day."

He just stared at me.

"Oh, and sometimes I'll head for the library at Dartmouth and do some research or read. Then, as long as I'm out, I'll head for the bookstore to see what's new."

Still nothing.

"But I also might do a couple of phone interviews if I'm working on a book or magazine article, and when I get a new idea for a book, then I'll spend the afternoon writing a proposal." I paused. "When I'm working on a travel book, I spend a lot of time on the road all over New England."

His vital signs had gone south.

"But when I'm under a deadline, that's when I really work."

Finally, signs of life returning.

"Oh yeah? How many hours a day do you work then?"

"Oh, five, six tops."

He threw his signed copy of my book down in disgust. "Lady, you're living like one of those goddamn college perfessers who's always going on sabbatical every other year."

As he stalked off, I thought, "Yeah, I guess I am."

As a writer, I've almost always worked for myself, so I guess it does seem like I live my life as if I'm on permanent sabbatical. I admit I'm incredibly spoiled by my work. It's not always as rosy as I've just made it out to be; but I honestly don't know how the majority of people can work the way they do.

I've always been a big proponent of people taking time off from their regular jobs, even if only for an afternoon. When I lived in New York, I remember calling my friends at their high-rise office complexes and cajoling them into playing hooky with me. To this day, I consider it my civic duty to convince anyone who will listen why they should take a break from work.

Many of you reading this will take time off and then return to your jobs. Perhaps I've gone a little overboard in some sections of this book, assuming that once you manage to extricate yourself from the office for even a short period of time, you'll start to hatch a plot where you can finally be on your own, living without a boss or time clock.

You Already Know How to Take Time Off

Chances are that you already know how to take a sabbatical. Although most people think of a college professor's year off when they hear the term *sabbatical,* I use the word to refer to any type of break from how you normally spend your time, whether it lasts for a month, for several years, or forever.

As Noel Aderer, one of the women interviewed for this book, puts it, "My life is one big sabbatical." Even though my varieties of time off have come in different flavors throughout the years, it is always that all-purpose sabbatical that drives my choice of career and where I choose to live.

My all-purpose sabbatical is my writing—I don't consider any part of my work to be work—and any time I'm writing, I'm learning about something I didn't know about before. They're all subjects that I'm passionately interested in.

Among my friends, I'm famous for my moving sabbaticals. I've lived at more than twenty different addresses in just over twelve years. After spending most of my childhood in the same house, I wanted to be footloose, and I was. My shortest tenure at any address was six weeks; my longest, two years. This sabbatical recently ended when I returned to the town where I finally feel I've grown some roots.

Then there was the sabbatical that I'm sure you're probably more than a little familiar with: the relationship sabbatical. You know, when you swear off men/women/whatever for a certain period of time. Finally there was my moving-to-the-country sabbatical.

My most regular sabbaticals have been my burnout sabbaticals, which usually come after a period of about six solid months of pitching ideas to publications and writing books and pieces for magazines. After the last assignment is handed in and there are no more on the horizon, I just stop what I'm

doing and take off. Traveling has always been my favorite way to spend time off, although sometimes it looks like work since I occasionally manage to get a book or two out of it.

Since I've written *Time Off From Work*, I've been amazed at the number of people I've met who've gotten off the merry-go-round for a while, whether they have money or not.

And whenever I casually mention to people that I've written a book on how to take a break from work, I seem to turn into an instant lightning rod for all their dreams and what they are going to do when they a) win the lottery, b) finally tell the boss where to go, and c) start to live the kind of life that they deserve.

Although this kind of fantasy wields an enormous amount of power over the majority of the American population, the truth is that carefully planning your time off—whether it's a sabbatical or family leave—will make you feel like you have much more control over your life. Plus, you don't have to wait for your lucky numbers to hit.

At this point, you're probably thinking it's important to take time off, but then doubts creep in: your boss won't stand for it, you can't afford it, what makes you think you can do this, etc. Believe me, everyone that I interviewed for this book said that this litany of excuses regularly ran through their minds as they planned their sabbaticals, and for some, it even continued through the early part of their time off.

Why? Probably because they sensed that their lives would change drastically as a result of their sabbatical. And the truth is that you certainly will not be the same person you were before your time off. I know I'm not. After I hooked into the pattern of taking periodic breaks from work, I discovered that if I could manage to take a breather every so often, I was probably capable of doing anything I wanted. I've tried a lot of different things over the years, failing, of course, at some projects while succeeding at others.

Exactly how *you'll* change is impossible to predict. Only know that it will happen.

For me, I've found that the time out that I've taken from writing has served to balance my interests and calm me down somewhat. Even though I do consider myself to be on permanent sabbatical, I still have been able to recognize the benefits from the real breaks that I've taken from my work. Sometimes, when you free up your mind from the usual working stresses and think about something else, that's usually when the best ideas crop up. The clamor and chaos of your job was probably enough to drown them out.

And that new idea might be enough to start a new project at work that will earn you a promotion, or else start you on an entirely new career path.

When I slow down, stop combing newspapers and magazines for ideas, and start reading for leisure, I find that the best ideas slam into my brain from out of left field.

For instance, one day, during one of my extended breaks, I was taking a long walk down a remote dirt road lined on both sides by sizable dairy farms. It was a gorgeous spring day, and the road was still muddy in parts, but I felt so lucky at that moment that I thought, "Why can't everyone be doing this right now?"

Thus was born the idea for *Time Off From Work*, and you're holding it in your hands right now.

1

Why Take Time Off?

Martha Owens of Manchester, Tennessee, was burned out. After working as a legal administrator for 24 years, 10 hours a day or more, she needed a break. "I really love what I do," she said, "but the 50- and 60-hour weeks were making me hate it."

Owens thought that taking two months off one summer to go to southwestern Colorado would give her the time away from the office that she needed. "Basically, I needed to learn how to relax, because with my job, I didn't know how," she said. She contacted a couple of friends who ran a summer ranch resort in Colorado and arranged with them to trade some chores for a cabin of her own and meals for July and August.

When she first approached her boss about taking the time off, he flatly refused. "I went back to him six weeks later, and again and again, and kept on him until he agreed that I could take the leave without pay," she says.

Owens said that her boss initially turned down her request because he was afraid that she wouldn't come back. "I told him that I had to come back because I have to make a

living. He let me go because he knew that I was going to go anyway, even if it meant that I would quit my job. So I went." She added, "But it was not with his blessing."

She started planning for her sabbatical even before she asked her boss for the time off. Owens paid her rent and some of her bills in advance and began to save money for traveling expenses. "It took a lot of discipline to do everything at the same time. I was really cutting corners," she says. But the advantage was that she wouldn't need to spend any money while she was away: her room and board were covered and the owners of the ranch also would give her $200 in compensation at the end of the summer.

Owens helped train a woman to fill in for her at the law office for five of the weeks she would be gone. However, she could see problems with the arrangement even before she left. "It was hard for me to let go of the quality of work, because I knew it wasn't going to be done the way I would have done it," she said.

Her coworkers and friends encouraged her to go, as did her children, but her parents thought she was crazy. "My mother thought that I wouldn't come back," she said.

Her hesitations aside, Owens left for her trip in July of 1992. Her destination was the Thirty Mile Ranch in Creede, Colorado. She spent her two months cooking and cleaning-a few hours a day and talking with the guests. The rest of the time she walked through the mountains, relaxed, and set aside time for reading and Bible study. "At home, I found that my mind was so clogged up that I could never do things like that," she said. "It made me realize that you have to set aside certain times at home for yourself and let nothing else get in the way."

The summer flew by, and Owens says that the only reason she came back to Tennessee was that she missed her two grandchildren, who live in the same town. If it weren't for them, however, she would have probably found a place

out west to work. She did stop in at a law firm in Santa Fe and made some contacts in Colorado Springs, but in the end, she said, she couldn't have moved out there because she's not fond of the cold weather.

Once she returned to her job, Owens was unprepared for the amount of work that had piled up in her absence, but she was able to convince her boss to hire a secretary to help her dig herself out. Even so, it wasn't until November that her routine at the office returned to normal, but she was determined to work without putting in a lot of overtime as she had in the past.

While she was out in Colorado, Owens frequently thought about what she could do to help keep her motivated once she returned to her job. She decided that taking two months off every year fit the bill.

"My boss told me that he can't have a part-time secretary who's going to be away two months every year, but each year he's going to have to go through the same thing," she said. "You know, he never even asked me about my trip to Colorado; in fact, he told me once that he didn't want to hear about it at all. But I'm going to prevail upon him again, and I feel that after I've worked for him for so long, I'm entitled to the time off.

"It took a lot of courage, and it took me being stubborn, making up my mind that I was going to do it no matter what," she said. "For someone who is devoted to her job and a workaholic to boot, time off is the only thing that was going to save me. I just wish I had the guts ten years ago to do this, because I think I would be calmer and more serene now."

Owens adds that even though she worried about what would happen at the office in her absence, she knew that once she left, the situation was out of her control. "The point is that you're still the employee and they're still the employer, and they're going to do what they're going to do whether you're there or not. If it takes two years to plan for

it, do it for yourself," she says. "I was raised in the old school, that when you're doing things for yourself, you're being selfish, but it's not true. Taking the time off was the very best thing I've ever done for myself."

Time Off: A Growing Trend

In her book *The Popcorn Report* (Doubleday 1991), trend forecaster Faith Popcorn calls sabbaticals "the luxury vacation of the 90s." In a 1990 poll conducted for the magazine *Special Report*, 64 percent of respondents aged 25 to 49 reported that they regularly dreamed about quitting their jobs to go off and do something else for a while. Their dreams ranged from something as hedonistic as traveling around the world to living on a desert island. Nineteen percent of respondents aged 35 to 49 said they think about taking time off from work at least once a day.

Sabbaticals have been a perennial favorite of academics for years. In fact, some professors have even admitted that one of the primary reasons they chose their profession is that they get to take off one year out of every seven; in essence, it is this prospect that keeps the headaches of the other six years tolerable.

Laypeople, or nonacademics, tend to think of time off for themselves only in terms of the standard issue two-week vacation, month of maternity leave, or enforced "sabbatical" that comes in between jobs.

Time off during the 1980s was almost unthinkable. With an economy that grew by leaps and bounds and a real estate market that followed suit, no one wanted to miss out. The recession of the nineties created the corporate triumvirate of downsizing, early retirement, and reduced working hours. As a result, many people began to question their loyalty to corporations that thought nothing of cutting 2,000 "sticky-