

Women, Hats and Doors

by Jane Merivale

L'auteure examine la multiplicité de ses rôles quotidiens en tant que mère, épouse, enseignante, employée et femme d'affaires.

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day at noon. Neither one of us was at home tending the family roast, nor were we in a classroom. We were in a mall. She was managing the mall's program for children; I was helping the performers. We were both working with other hats on.

Since the implementation of the social contract in the public sector—my world—and the “downsizing” of companies in the private sector—my partner's world—I have not been able to regard my salary as income. As a two-income—taxed, mortgaged-to-the-hilt family, it has proved impossible to live without financial worries and to do anything within the realm of moderately extravagant, without feeling overwhelmed by debt as a result.

I came to this country almost six years ago with no credit cards, and, oddly enough, no creditability. Having living in Sri Lanka for the past eight years where there were none of these “consume more” devices, I arrived in Canada without even an acceptable driver's license to demonstrate my reliability. Since living here, I have obtained more credit cards, and more debt, than I have ever encountered in my whole life.

I had to find a way to help ends meet, a way out. Even though I needed a new hat like the proverbial hole in

the head, I had to find a new job. To supplement my real job...to supplement my night school job. To support this, to achieve that....

In short, a new job, an income, to help with all the demands on my pocketbook. I had to think of something else to do that would enable me to meet my financial requirements. Looking for a job as an employee of a company was not a possibility for many different reasons, but mainly because the work had to be, in the light of my main work, on my own time. In addition, the work had to require skills that I already had. Also, my six-year old made it imperative that a lot of the work could be done at home. I had to be my own manager, and any money I made had to belong to my company.

What was I going to do and how could I meet all these requirements? I thought of all the strengths I had that I could offer to others; things that I do everyday but on which I had never thought of “capitalizing.” I put all these skills into an idea for a company that would answer people's needs as broadly as possible—to ensure I could get some work! An entrepreneur was born and Magic Ink was its name!

What was my new business? It was to write or edit anything—resumes, letters, reports—anything for anyone, to teach anything (I could) to anyone including letter writing, public speaking, and ESL, my specialization, to facilitate any meeting or organize any group or any event—in short, to do what ever I could in any communication/organization field that I felt comfortable with.

Being propelled into finding more work was one thing, actually getting it was another and my experience was that anything that needed any investment on my part was impossible because the banks, for all their rhetoric about small business support, proved absolutely unhelpful.

The most remarkable thing I find is that the “build it and they'll come” theory works because once I got the trappings of a business under way, and then could begin talking to people about what I did (or wanted to do!), I got a few, very small contracts.

Firstly, I registered the company in the Business Register. For a fee of fifty dollars one's business can become “official” and this certainly gives the small entrepreneur clout. I am often asked if I am a “registered” company, and I can say “yes!” A corollary of registration is the amount of junk mail on business related consumer products, on tax advice services, on computer software, and so on. However, I did manage to find a company that would print my labels and give me a stamp pad and other paraphernalia that goes with developing a business. The most important of these is a business card. Having lived in Japan, where “*meshi*,” or business cards, are *de rigueur*, I have known forever how essential this is. I always have them handy and, at the slightest pull on the line, I hand out my card. As networking is increasingly such an important part of “taking off” in

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business, business cards are crucial. Mine don't have graphics, but they are in black and white and bold, so the name stands out. Once I had all the trappings of a successful business woman, I had to find work.

The first area I searched in was right in my own neighbourhood. Could I be of any assistance to my neighbours? During our garage sale

that summer, I made myself flyers with the help of a neighbour's super laser printer, and then handed them out to everyone who came to our sale.

That exercise generated one or two proof-reading jobs, small jobs, but they enabled me to tell other people that *Magic Ink* had a contract, and that in turn helped people take interest. When I was offered a contract job in communications, it was easy to say yes and I had the company in place to accommodate it.

Magic Ink is by no means a big company now. I envisage *Magic Ink's* success taking years and, no doubt, many transformations, but that is also the character of a second job, one doesn't give up the day job. However, I do have ongoing work, and the more I do, the better I will be known and word of mouth will work. Work and more work comes, and the hats keep changing to accommodate this.

Women, someone remarked to me the other day, change hats as often as they are required to do so. Frequently my hat changes from door to door... It really can all be summed up by doors....

The front door I close on the breakfast dishes; the classroom door I open on eager faces (yes, eager, really waiting for me to produce their marked papers...); the school door I open to collect my anxious son whose face asks me how long we've got before I go out and can we have a story; the class room door I open to give new Canadians some hope that there is life after learning English; the door I open on my office to fulfill my contracts in my few quiet hours; and the door I open again to say goodnight to my family, already asleep and not listening to the unsaid.

Doors. And hats. So many hats, so little time.

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BARBARA PARKIN

The Stillness of His Mother

He hangs from branches
breaks falls with ravaged sand
slides down stairs
& throws himself into everything.
His mother moves delayed,
climbs the plank
to catch the child
& a glimpse of the stillness
of her life.

The two-year-old child races a circuit
around his mother's mind.
Days suspend as he rushes
into the physics of his new world,
establishes territory
& proclaims: Mine. His mother,
taut between two zones of time:
hers, his.
She has not always seen it this way.

When she puts him to rest, she wakes
briefly into her first name
& watches him slide
into his ocean sheets, grey whales
mobile above him. The only activity:
the sound of breathing
hers, his.

On the sofa she sits alone
where he remains with her
primordial, the salt content
of the sea that made him.

She swigs cold tea, dusts
around a novel half-started
& milk spilt across
an otherwise flavourless letter
to a friend across the country.
The phone hints at contact
with layers gone under. Identity shifts
like tectonic plates.

From under the ocean sheets she hears
him call, Mama. Mine.

Barbara Parkin's fiction and poetry have appeared in Grain, Descant, Scrivener, Room of One's Own, Prairie Fire, and many other publications. She is the mother of two young children.