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§ CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE §

One Thousand Small Steps, a Few Giant Leaps

Frances Green

Driving forces have shaped my life. Perhaps the most significant is, indeed, the most universal: the search for fulfillment—that endless journey of the soul that led me to places I never wanted to go and, once I arrived, never wanted to leave. Then there’s the drive for attention—that is, for me, being the center of attention and *paying attention* to who I am. This is not a selfish preoccupation, but a worldview of being ready, willing, and steadfast. I believe one of the greatest gifts we can give to ourselves and to each other throughout our lives is full attention to who we are, what we are doing, and who we are becoming.

This kind of focus has contributed to the success of Epstein Becker & Green’s Women’s Initiative, which I cofounded eight years ago. The mission of the Women’s Initiative—to enhance the careers of professional women by providing opportunities both inside and outside the office to network, share information, acquire skills, and develop rewarding professional relationships—essentially mirrors my life. Our Women’s Initiative presents lectures by accomplished women leaders and events that educate, entertain, and facilitate networking with other women professionals. We have set the scene for great women to accomplish great things.

The Women's Initiative has provided me with some of the most gratifying experiences of my legal career—which, itself, is the culmination of rather unconventional personal and professional journeys. These journeys are so intertwined that, looking back, it is hard to see where one begins and the other ends.

Family Influences

In both the figurative sense (with respect to my father) and the literal sense (with respect to my mother), my parents loomed large in setting my professional journey in motion.

My father, a naturalized U.S. citizen, born in Ireland, was a U.S. Army paratrooper during World War II, who sustained debilitating injuries in North Africa and Anzio, Italy. A recipient of numerous medals and citations for bravery and valor, my father joined the Veterans Administration of the American Red Cross after the war and advocated for veterans' rights. Although not an attorney, he was well educated, due to his postgraduate Jesuit Seminary studies in the United States and abroad, and, given his Irish roots, was quite the raconteur. Most of all, he was a highly effective and tireless advocate. His experiences helped define my life.

As the second of four children, I yearned, like some others in this unfortunate birth order, for my parents' attention. And I devised creative ways to get it. I would slip on my mother's outfits and then parade around the neighborhood in them. Memories linger of my being plucked off the sidewalk by a neighbor who reported my antics to my mom.

When costuming grew old, I retreated to the companionship of an imaginary friend, Mrs. BB. She was forty-something years of age, a great listener, and one of the best mentors I ever had. Even back then, older women lighted my way. I spent a lot of time confiding my aspirations to Mrs. BB, and she was unceasingly encouraging. With nary a criticism nor a frown, Mrs. BB was my bulwark against any adversity I conjured in my little world.

My fuller world was shattered at the age of nine when my father died of a heart attack—right in front of me. My mother was left to raise four children on her own. She struggled to keep our young family afloat. Our faith in each other and her faith—a brand of heavy-handed Catholicism—helped pull us through the roughest patches. A remarkable woman at any time, but particularly when “single moms” were virtually unheard of and certainly not touted as an alternative lifestyle, she tended to her disparate brood, ranging in ages from eleven months to eleven years.

While I loved my mother, I had always admired my father. After his death, admiration was transformed into hero worship, abetted by my mother’s colorful tales of my dad’s adventures. I reveled in the thought that one day, I, too, could be that adventurous. Diane von Furstenberg once remarked, “I had always had this fantasy of having a man’s life in a women’s body.” For me, it was the same. Indeed, my mother, distraught over the seemingly endless parade of young men I dated, once told me, “You don’t want to marry someone like your father; you want to *be* your father.”

However, my quest to “be [like my] father” followed a somewhat unorthodox route. Frantic that I might somehow become a ward of the State if I could not earn a living, my mother decided that secretarial training would assure me not only a living, but also possibly a husband. So off I went to a finishing school run by the Sisters of Charity in New York. Ironically, or presciently, a nun who was my instructor there approached me one day and, apropos of nothing in particular, remarked, “*You* would make a great nun.” Although this comment was both amusing and offensive at the time, it was also prophetic.

Corporate Career

My criterion for accepting a job offer after graduation from finishing school was simple. The corporation, where I ultimately began my professional odyssey, had a cafeteria. Bored as a secretary, but enabled by wonderful male mentors (unfortunately, there

were virtually no women in the management ranks), I moved up—and out—to become one of the first women to hold a position in senior management.

My sense of accomplishment was tempered, however, by the realization that I was a woman without a college degree, advising PhD graduates on issues related to the management of personnel in a corporate world of more than 120,000 employees. So I enrolled in night school to pursue my baccalaureate degree.

Although my corporate career and college studies were progressing nicely, the itch for adventure was unabated. During a business trip to Texas in the 1970s, while rummaging through a pile of mail that my secretary had labeled “junk,” I happened upon a “women in business” type of magazine. (Because of the liberating decade of the sixties, which spawned a new concept of feminism, as well as affirmative action programs by the federal government, a new genre of women’s publications, which included the magazine in my junk mail, began sprouting up like clover. Religious orders, too, got on the bandwagon.) As I turned the magazine’s pages, an advertisement by the Maryknoll Sisters—Catholic nuns who devote their lives to service to the poor and disenfranchised throughout the world—caught my eye. The ad asked, in essence, “Are you the kind of person who wants to stand with the poor and disenfranchised and live a vowed life in community with other women?” I was ready for a radical commitment, not to mention an adventure. When I arrived in Texas, I attached my business card to the ad and mailed them to the Maryknoll Sisters.

A couple of weeks later, I received a letter addressed to “Mr.” as the sisters perhaps couldn’t conceive of a woman having her own business card. Once my gender was sorted out, the sisters gratefully accepted my application, and I made the decision to join this religious order. My choice to walk away from a promising corporate future was greeted by collective shock and disbelief. Simply put, my colleagues thought that I was in the throes of a breakdown. Joining a convent at a time of a newly dawning age for

women's rights, and forsaking a place at the corporate table, was considered tantamount to insanity.

Faith and Focus

Becoming a nun made perfect sense to me. At twenty-nine years of age, I was burning the candle at both ends. I was the party girl who dated constantly and had already broken off two engagements. With a milestone age just around the corner, I sought major changes in my life—a focus on faith, a sense of stability and order, and a new career path. Needless to say, my mother was horrified.

Admittedly, adapting to life in a “community” made up entirely of women was extremely challenging. I embarked on a vigorous program of running (the allegory should not be missed here) six to eight miles each day. Although I considered myself a “new woman” with radical viewpoints, I discovered that I was surrounded by like-minded women, not “new” (some really, really old, in fact), but equally radical, who shared the same sense of adventure and challenge as I did. It was transformative. Again, my world was rocked.

My epiphany was complete in a most unexpected moment. A Maryknoll sister, who had spent most of her vowed years in Japan living in a Buddhist monastery, had returned home to the Maryknoll community for a short visit. After we dined together, I was washing dishes—a chore that I wanted to complete as quickly as possible so that I could take a nice, calming six-miler before darkness fell. This sister graciously offered to help me with the dishes. She drove me crazy! She gently caressed each dish she handled, wiping the water away with a slow, calculated circular motion. Sensing my obvious frustration, she remarked, “When you dry a dish, you dry a dish.” I did not intend to discuss the metaphor. Although she was fully present in the moment, in my mind I was three miles down the road in my Nikes.

We finished the dishes, finally. I went out for the run, but I was changed, and I knew it. Meeting her was a milestone in my

life, a point of enlightenment. As a result of our encounter, I was determined to become more attentive and present. And I wanted to learn about Japan and Buddhism.

Advocacy and Law

By the early 1980s, I took my vows as a nun and, to my delight, was sent by the community to live and work in Japan. While studying Japanese each day, I was fortunate to work with another sister in inner-city Tokyo, ministering to men suffering with alcoholism and AIDS—problems as serious in Japan as elsewhere at that time. I learned to speak Japanese, fell in love with Japan and its people, and relished the opportunity to help in the rehabilitation of some and to comfort others with no hope of recovery. I learned that my shoulder-length, curly blonde hair transcended the language barrier. Most Japanese were not used to seeing blondes and were utterly fascinated. I have come to believe that, both in work and in play, you bring all your assets to the party. Even as a nun, I knew this to be true.

My time in Japan was all too short. I learned that my mother's cancer had returned after a ten-year period of remission. Soon after receiving this news, I was back in New York.

Coming home had its challenges. The order okayed my living at a convent near my mom and approved my request to restart my college studies—at thirty-three years of age. Juggling my studies, a dying mother, and a sisterhood community at the same time was no mean feat. Whether due to those circumstances, or the inchoate knowledge that much more was awaiting me, I made another leap of faith, and probably the hardest decision of my life—to leave the Maryknoll Sisters. Perhaps I was lost. But I was also blessed.

In a surprising turn of events, the next phase of my professional journey was about to commence. I was introduced to the director of admissions of a local, but solid law school. She encouraged me to take the law school admission test. Here was yet another women showing me a new way of living my life. Starting on the

path to a legal career seemed to make perfect sense. I was drawn to law because of my interest in biblical law and the realization discovered in Japan that most of us, at one time or another, need an advocate—someone to speak for us, petition on our behalf, give us a voice, and make us heard.

So at the age of thirty-five, I went off to law school. I was broke. In my desperation to get money to pay bills, I took a job hoisting cargo at John F. Kennedy International Airport. I thoroughly enjoyed law school and eventually became a Moot Court Scholar (emphasis on “scholar” because with that came scholarship money to pay my tuition).

I had a bit of a scare during the bar admission process, though. The character and fitness portion of my bar exam required me to disclose that I had been arrested as a nun for acts of so-called civil disobedience before I went to Japan, while demonstrating with a well-known Jesuit priest, Daniel Berrigan. My greatest fear was that the character and fitness committee would be horrified by my arrests, and my legal career would be over before it had begun. My fear, fortunately, wasn’t realized, and I was admitted to the bar.

While at my first legal job for a brief nine months, I received a telephone call that dramatically changed my life. A partner at a leading law firm, who had been one of my former colleagues, told me that his firm was considering opening an office in Japan. He was aware of my strong Japanese background and invited me to join the firm—the same firm where I am today, Epstein Becker & Green. It is an exceptional firm. In fact, about half of the firm’s current professionals are women. The firm was founded nearly forty years ago by men who were smart enough to hire bright and talented women who were turned away from other firms, in large measure, because of their gender.

Accepting that invitation was another transformative step in my journey. I was offered an opportunity to serve as an advocate for Japanese and non-Japanese clients, travel internationally, and develop rewarding professional relationships. And because the

firm had hired so many capable women attorneys, I was able to become a better attorney by interacting with, and learning from, these women. I also met the man who is now my husband.

In 2002, a couple of my female colleagues and I decided that the firm would benefit from a women's initiative designed to coalesce the diverse energies of our women attorneys and create more women leaders in the firm. Throughout my professional journey, I was fortunate to have received attention, guidance, and support from women. Indeed, without the women in my life I would not be where I am today. Through the firm's Women's Initiative, I have been able to offer women guidance, encouragement, and opportunities to build their networks.

My career is still going strong after two decades. Even though I am beyond the midpoint of my life, I know that there is more to come, more steps to be taken, and more leaps to be made. I feel content and fulfilled by both my work as an attorney and my involvement with the Women's Initiative.

Leaps of Faith

Looking over my professional journey, I am thankful that I took the giant leaps of faith that were necessary to attain fulfillment—from relinquishing a bright future at a major corporation for a life at a convent and work in Japan, to departing the convent for a legal career, and then leaving my first law firm job for a position at Epstein Becker & Green. I never let naysayers stand in my way.

Everything that I have done during my journey has been part of a winnowing process that has helped me become more attentive, centered, and focused. I do not regret any of my choices.

I have learned to be fully present in my journey, both professionally and personally. I have finally found peace.