

SHOWDOWN WITH SUZANNE

The great tragedy of life is that man demands a return or reward for all that he does, either in money or praise.

– Henry T. Hamblin

The yelling match with my boss started on a Friday afternoon, late in the workday. I was already exhausted when Suzanne charged into my office waving a stack of papers. My e-mail inbox dinged incessantly with the arrival of new messages. The clock glared at me, ticking away minutes, bringing me closer and closer to deadline on two major projects, neither of which I was close to finishing.

One of them, a results report showing the media hits our PR agency had secured for a big-budget client, was in Suzanne's hands, the victim of her relentlessly critical eye.

"More changes," she announced. I took furious notes. Down to the wire and she still had nit-picky edits. Nothing was ever complete enough, nothing was ever good enough. There were always revisions to be made, always more criticism spilling from her perfectly colored lips.

"How's the presentation coming?" she asked. That was the other project, the one I hadn't even started.

“I haven’t had a chance to work on it because I’ve been busy working on this results report,” I admitted, sighing as I gestured toward the papers in her hand.

My fatigue and annoyance at working late on Friday must have come through in my voice. Supposedly, a company perk was a half-day Friday schedule, not that I could remember the last time I’d actually left at noon.

“I can do without the attitude,” Suzanne snapped. “I’m still here working, too, and I work many more hours than you do. In fact, I’ve heard you’re very protective of your time. Your hours are rarely as high as everyone else’s, and I hardly ever see e-mails from you at night or on weekends.”

Whoa. My first instinct was to cower under her curtness. I’d always been an overachiever and a chronic perfectionist, a person aiming to please every authority figure I encountered. But her accusation was outrageous. My eyes were burning with fatigue because I’d been working so hard during the weekdays. Not to mention I’d rarely missed a deadline in an industry that thrives on tight turnarounds and last-minute emergencies.

“How can you say you promote work-life balance if you expect people to work all the time?” I shot back.

Suzanne’s eyes narrowed. “If you don’t want to work more than nine to five, then you shouldn’t be working in PR,” she said icily.

I glanced away toward a small cartoon hanging on my wall. It showed an enlightened man sitting on a mountain, looking down on a seeker who’d climbed a ladder to reach him. The wisdom in the

dialogue bubble above the enlightened man said, “The Hokey Pokey. That’s what it’s all about.” The message carried much more meaning for me than anyone would have guessed from a simple cartoon.

“You’re right,” I said, turning back to my boss. “In fact, I’m already re-evaluating whether this company is the right place for me.”

That’s what stopped her. I don’t think Suzanne expected me to agree with her. She was notorious for getting the last word, and I think she wanted to take a jab at me, purposely reminding me that I was dispensable. I’m sure she was certain I’d recoil under the power she believed she possessed – and that *I* believed she possessed. Not anymore.

I told Suzanne that I didn’t *feel* good, that even if she didn’t realize it, I was working my ass off, and I was burned out. I told her how insane I thought it was that everyone at her agency worked non-stop all day without a break and that many people barely had time to eat lunch before they had to run off to the next meeting. I told her how ridiculous it was that even when taking vacation time, I still got phone calls and demands because everyone was taking everything so seriously that they couldn’t let it lie for a couple of days.

And then I told her she wasn’t paying me enough to work my life away all day, all night, all weekend.

It was the gutsiest and most liberating thing I’d ever said to an authority figure. Part of me understood that Suzanne could easily ask for my resignation, but a stronger, calmer part of me knew that even if she fired me on the spot, I’d be okay. In those few words, I’d done my best rendition of the hokey pokey yet, because I’d told my boss that I wouldn’t play the game anymore. I *would not* define my

life by the job or impressive titles she dangled in front of me. Everything my friend and counselor, Adele, had taught me came alive during that conversation.

The change in Suzanne was quite startling. Far from revving up to fire me, she became uncharacteristically quiet and accommodating. She said she'd increase my salary and let me come in late sometimes – whatever it took to keep me happy so I'd stay.

A year before, I'd have taken the raise (which turned out to be 18 percent, a pretty hefty increase) as affirmation that I was valuable and that I was making progress in fulfilling my typical American dream: owning a big house, driving a nice car, and living in material comfort. The problem was that as I'd begun learning to see the world's problems, expectations, and stresses as simply hokey pokey, I knew that Suzanne could have doubled my salary and it wouldn't have made my job any more worthwhile.

What I'm striving for now is peace. Although sometimes I'm still afraid to admit it, I want more than anything to free myself from the pressure of believing I need an important job title and a big bank account to have a meaningful, purposeful life.

A woman twice my age who survived a life-threatening disease is teaching me how to do that. Through her own journey, she's discovered a new way to view life under the guise of a famous but simple childhood song.