Lesson 16

There’s Me and There’s Me and There’s Me:
It May be Too Much, But Too Little of Me is Not Enough
Michele DeStefano

You’re different and different – then you’re different again.
– HENRY JAMES, from THE WINGS OF A DOVE

They say good things come in threes. I hope “they” are right because there are three of me.

There’s Me: the personal Me. The romantic who will drink a bottle of wine with you in the middle of the day and walk in the rain in Central Park holding your hand. The friend who will laugh at stupid jokes because it feels good to laugh. The Me who take risks, jumps without thinking, takes a trip on a whim, and who dreams big, and cries hard. There is silly Me who gets lost in a paper bag driving to the same place I’ve been before. And don’t forget rash Me who says things I don’t mean in the heat of the moment and who takes them back right away (ok, eventually), and then there’s forever-faithful, loyal Me who will forgive fast and often – over and over again.

Then there’s second Me, the maternal Me, the Me I grew into over time. The Me who thinks before I act and protects and defends you against attack, who holds your hair back from your face when you are sick. The Me who cuddles with you as we watch some show in which I have no interest. The Me who checks in on you without being asked, who knows without being told, who answers the phone in the middle of the night and really listens—even when you repeat what you say. The Me that knows you are lying and loves you just the same. This Me has your back. This Me is also the one who will believe you when no one else will. This Me is the one who puts up with everything and puts out what it takes to hold everything together—all while on a conference call with that other Me: the third Me.

Me-three is an altogether different me, one who I created after graduating from college because I thought I was supposed to, because that’s what everyone did, because it worked better that way. The third Me, the “work Me,” was supposed to think, to act, and to most certainly appear differently. With nylons, heels, and hair pinned back, third-Me spoke in measured tones, waited my turn, respected hierarchies and walls, and prayed desperately no one would realize that the other two Me were wild, crazy, clueless, and often lost (both figuratively and literally). The third Me loved praise (and money) and promotions (and money). The third Me wanted respect and recognition and to make it to the top—and would conform to do so. The third Me wanted to check boxes and see improvement that could be plotted on an x/y graph. The third Me wanted to have it all. The third Me wanted to get the children ready for school, show up for work unruffled and on-time despite the sibling fighting, the spilled orange juice, and the sticky pancake syrup on the collar of my shirt (that I tried to lick off with my finger). The third Me wanted to be seen as a Wonder Woman—someone detail-oriented but someone who could see the forest through the trees; someone, bright, organized, and with vision; someone with a computer by day and a family of five around a table eating a home-cooked meal at night as her loving spouse toasted her brilliance (and patted the perfect black lab nearby who was definitely NOT begging for table scraps). In reality however, my third Me? Well, she was an epic mess.

She was tired, short-tempered, and forever feeling inadequate. She was not just physically thin, she was thin-skinned as well. My third Me had a detectable shrill timbre in her voice that had not always been there. And the third Me hated the weakness in my other Me, despite the fact that this ‘weakness’ was
what also made the other Mes ‘human’ and relatable. My third me yelled at the first two Mes as they cried at night behind closed doors because they were doing nothing very well. “Stop your whining!” third Me would scream to the other two. My third Me hated the stupid TV dramas that portrayed the happy working mom, successfully married with children and a full array of girlfriends from all eras of her life. To hold back the tears, third Me assuaged herself: “Yeah right. No one has all that.” My third Me (the resentful Me) scoffed at the stay-at-home-moms for their trips to Target and the brownies they brought to homeroom for Halloween. But gradually, I let third Me give way to the other Mes in Me.

Third Me still exists. But third Me does not exist on her own; instead, I bring all three Mes with me all the time: to work, at home, and everywhere else in my life. And this has made all the difference. I live in a world that does not seek work-life balance nor even what millennials seek: work-life integration. I live in a world where there are no walls between Me-one, Me-two, and Me-three. I live in a world without walls—literally and figuratively—and here’s why: I started a program called LawWithoutWalls (L WOW) at the University of Miami School of Law. L WOW was designed to break down the walls between academics and students, between lawyers and business professionals, between schools of different rank and lawyers from different cultures.

I had a big dream and I needed every Me to make it come true. And the only way to have all of Me was to break down the walls between me and my various self-concepts: my personal self, my maternal self, and my work self. (Paul J. Brouwer wrote eloquently about the dynamics of our self-concepts in his 1964 article The Power to See Ourselves for the HARVARD BUSINESS REVIEW.) And so I set out to develop a place that was like what urban sociologist Ray Oldenberg calls a “third place”: not the home, not the office, but something altogether different, where people from different disciplines and all walks of life come together. I developed L WOW as a third place—and most definitely not on my own. I co-developed it with people from all of my Me-spaces. I invited colleagues from work, I invited friends and family and my significant other (along with ex-lovers and even my ex-husband) to be a part of building and growing L WOW and, in so doing, my friends became work colleagues in L WOW, and my work colleagues in L WOW became my friends.

By taking part in L WOW, my friends and family gained an understanding of and appreciation for my work. Now, even my children have spent late nights scrambling to prepare presentations or to prep an event space with me. And that has brought my friends, my family, my colleagues and my three Mes even closer together. Over time (and yes it took time), as I asked those who joined me to break down the walls between them—between lawyer and client, between mentor and mentee, between Partner and Associate, and between lawyers from competing firms—I learned to do the same with my Mes. Eventually, (and yes it was eventually) I brought all of myself—personal, maternal, and work—together into one space and broke down the walls between them. So now there’s Me, and Me, and Me, and we are one in the same. While I still make mistakes all the time, I no longer beat myself up about it, and neither do my work colleagues, or my family, or my friends, because they are one in the same—and we are all in this together.

They say good things come in threes. The three Mes? They agree. And they are ok with being “different and different—then . . . different again.”

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