



The Man Who Would Be “Play-Doh”

Each of us has the capacity to shape ourselves, and to be shaped by our work and our relationships

By Dennis Coyne

Eric is a successful young lawyer—by any measure but his. He is tall, handsome, affable, and poised. He has excellent credentials, including graduating with honors from a well-respected law school where he served on the law review.

As A Partnership Offer Looms In View, He Is Very Dissatisfied And Wants To Quit

These days, Eric is a senior associate at a prestigious law firm. As an associate, Eric doesn't think it is appropriate to decline any work that is assigned to him. So, Eric is always on-call. And because he is always so accommodating and does excellent work, he has earned the reputation of being a great “go-to” guy. All too often, the assignments come to Eric at the last minute, and he finds himself working into the late evening, or through the weekends.

Eric has earned the respect of the partners and expects to get a partnership offer this year. Yet, just as the partnership offer looms in view, he finds himself very dissatisfied and wants to quit.

For Eric, The Problem Is That He Has No Life Of His Own

On the surface, Eric's resolve to leave the practice seems surprising—the pay is good; the offices are comfortable; and the people are nice. Yet, Eric doesn't have any real friends at the firm. For one reason or another, all the associates in his entering class have left the practice. Eric describes himself as the last associate standing, and he feels isolated.

For Eric, the problem is that he has no life of his own. He says that he is happily married and wants to have a family, but there doesn't seem to be time for that. Once a competitive athlete, he is now pudgy. He has no time to get into shape. He only has time to be “on-call.”

“All I Really Want To Do Is To Be Play-Doh.”

Eric is articulate and emotional as he describes his situation. As he sees it, his goal is to escape the firm and leave the practice of law. He has ideas about graduate school and starting a new career. And as he talks about the inevitable interviews for a new job, Eric blurts out: “All I really want to do is to be *Play-Doh*.” As his words land on him, he nods in agreement with his observation. As Eric sees it, if he is Play-Doh he can fit whatever job description he finds, get whatever job he wants, wherever he may go.

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As I listen to Eric, I have several responses. First, I am startled that a successful young attorney would only want to be Play-Doh; that his only ambition would be to conform himself to someone else's description of a job to be filled. As I thought about my own life, the concept of being Play-Doh seemed foreign to me, at least at first. But then I recalled those times in my life when I lost confidence in the choices I was making and simply wanted someone else to make the decisions for me.

How about you? Have you ever wanted to be Play-Doh? And if you did, how did being Play-Doh suit you? Are you Play-Doh today?

A Person Who Lives A Life "On Call" Has Not Learned How To Set Boundaries, And Care For Himself

I think that Eric needn't worry about being Play-Doh, for that is what he already is. A person who lives a life "on call" has not learned how to set boundaries, and care for himself. That might not be so bad if the failure to set boundaries at work did not so often extend to other aspects of life. And the adult who fails to set boundaries for himself will not likely be able to teach children in the family how to set appropriate boundaries for themselves, either.

Amy Is Also On The Cusp Of A Partnership Offer, But She Isn't Willing To Give Up Her Life

Third, I think of Amy. Like Eric, Amy is a bright senior associate in a prestigious law firm, on the cusp of a possible partnership offer. And like Eric, Amy is not inclined to accept the invitation to become a partner. As she sees the partners around her, too few seem to have a life of their own, and she isn't willing to give up her life for the sake of prestige and wealth. But there the comparisons between Eric and Amy end.

For years, Amy has been rigorous in setting boundaries at work. She has gone part-time, working four days a week. In doing so, she has bucked the norms at her firm. Many have told her that working part-time would likely prevent her from becoming a partner. But, Amy has other interests and commitments. So, somehow she has learned to decline assignments and protect her schedule, all the while doing excellent work and earning the respect of her partners. Amy has never aspired to be Play-Doh.

It Is Important That Eric Begins To Set Boundaries

So, what is my advice to Eric? First, it is important that Eric begins to set boundaries. He needs to take a stand for himself, where he finds himself now. He can do so respectfully and strategically, helping to orchestrate available resources to get the assignments done. If Eric does not learn an alternative to being Play-Doh, he will continue to suffer the consequences wherever he finds himself in the future.

Second, Eric can enlist some of the people in his life to support him, as he sets out on a new course of action. Who inspires Eric, and who are his life teachers? With their encouragement and being accountable to them, he is more apt to be able to set and maintain boundaries, at work and elsewhere.

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**Each Of Us Has The Capacity To Shape Ourselves,
And To Be Shaped By Our Work And Our Relationships**

Third, it will be important for Eric to be aware of the benefits of having more of a life of his own, and to become clear about his commitments—for whom and for what does he seek to change? His imagination will be helpful here, as he sees himself in new behaviors, enjoying the benefits of doing things in a new way.

In sum, Play-Doh is a helpful metaphor for all of us because each of us is malleable. Each of us has the capacity to shape ourselves, and to be shaped by our work and our relationships.

In his book, *Holding the Center*, author and poet David Whyte has written about how life shapes us, and how we can shape ourselves:

We shape our work, and then, not surprisingly, we are shaped again by the work we have done. Sometimes to our distress, we find ourselves in a place where the work suddenly seems to be doing all the shaping, where we do not seem to lift ourselves out of the mud of our own making, where we do not feel able to shape ourselves at all. At this point no strategy will free us from our imprisonment, no new organizer will organize us into something new; we need time and a renewed sense of the breadth and depth of time in which to do the reimagining that is the essence of self-shaping. It is the reimagining of ourselves in our own private time that allows us to then reshape ourselves in conversation with the world.

My hope for Eric, and my hope for all of us, is that we consciously shape ourselves for the sake of whom we love, and what we value. And for us attorneys, our profession will be the better for it.



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