

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 *Mes* 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 *Mes*, 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 (LWOW) at the University of Miami School of Law. LWOW 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 LWOW 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 LWOW and, in so doing, my friends became work colleagues in LWOW, and my work colleagues in LWOW became my friends.

By taking part in LWOW, 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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