

A life in first class?

Eileen Klitvad, coach, process consultant and psychotherapist, has lived a professional life many dream about. She was headhunted from one management job to another in large international companies, until one day she stopped to think. What is a job in first class worth when one starts to doubt who one really is and starts asking question such as who manages the priorities, what is important right and meaningful for me, and am I really so sure I am living my life in the most satisfying way possible? These questions were Eileen's starting point for making new choices in her professional life, and she was ready for the consequences, because, as she says, "if you do not dare test your dreams and try different things, you will never know what makes you happy." Today, Eileen is many facets richer. Read her story.

By Gitte Larsen

Who am I when I am authentic, and what kind of identity do I want to practice in my professional life? The question is asked by Eileen Klitvad, 47, until recently an independent consultant after decades of management and board positions in large Danish and international companies, and she is probably not the only one who asks it. On the other hand, she has done more than most to find the answer in recent years.

Eileen sits on her sofa in one of Copenhagen's affluent suburbs, and talks about what it means for her to wonder about the real meaning of her work. Behind the suit. Behind the manager. Behind the person. And is clear that it is her professional identity she has challenged and sought a deeper meaning about. Because at home, she is in no doubt about who she is. She acknowledges that if she had not had a comfortable private space, it would have been much harder, perhaps even unmanageable, for her to take the path she has followed in recent years. And the most interesting thing for her was to discover how much more authentically she has always lived in the private part of her life. In the process she has been through, it has been a great joy to discover that she can benefit from integrating – and is able to integrate – the 'private Eileen' with 'working Eileen' in an authentic way.

Suits and t-shirt

Four years ago, immediately after being certified as an ICC coach, she began a course at the Danish Psychotherapeutic Institute. She has taken course the course in psychotherapy on weekends, while holding a demanding job and while completing a diploma in clinical industrial psychology from INSEAD, one of the world's leading business schools. In other words, she has spent four years exploring her work identity, challenging herself and testing the dream.

The differences Ellen experienced between daily life in the executive suite and life at the Psychotherapeutic Institute underscored the inner self-examination she is still conducting to answer her many questions. Her journey has brought joys and sorrows, ups and downs, tears – and many smiles. And though the study of life has proven to be a perpetual project, she feels she now has a much more authentic working identity. It is as if she has understood the polarities that tear at her, and has managed to integrate the various parts of her personality. She has given herself room and permission to be a whole person. She has accepted both the different facets of herself and the whole, and it seems she is comfortable in being who she is and comfortable with what there is in professional life.

"When I was HR Director at Berlingske Media, Telia Denmark, Coca-Cola Germany and Coca-Cola Scandinavia, I put on the "uniform" when I went to work. Not only

the business suit, but also the way I chose to behave. At work, you can choose to "engage or distance yourself," "socialize with colleagues and employees or leave it" and "express your views or not." I never said anything I did not mean, but there were things I did not say or do if I felt it would be outside the acceptable norm I attached to my role. That is of course ok, as long as you are do not force yourself to put inappropriate ties on yourself as the person you are. At the same time, I wore a different type of "uniform" at the psychotherapeutic Institute, and, with that relaxed outfit, came the freedom to be the "naked me" - after a little practice and provocation. I was able to escape the controlled facade, and dare to express my thoughts and feelings and show genuine joy, deep sorrow and anger. I could drop the "mask" for better or for worse. The contrast between the two worlds was enormous. Initially, I struggled to maintain the "proper and adjusted facade" in both places, but as time passed, it was hard not to "be myself" no matter which world I was in. I was simply confused: Who was I, really? Manager? Psychotherapist? Something in between?"

Her soul-searching led Eileen to question her life, dreams, priorities, choices and herself. She asked more and more questions about what was right for her, and she become more and more critical with regard to what she would go along with and not accept.

"I got to know myself better and better by exploring the different facets of myself. Little by little. Just noticing the difference between the conscious and the unconscious uniforms have underscored how valuable it is to move in different environments. There is a world of difference between sitting at the morning round at the psychotherapeutic institute, talking about how I am right "here and now," and sitting at a management meeting, discussing business challenges, results, budgets and long-term strategies. The contrasts are just huge."

Chaos, faith and courage

Eileen seized the opportunity and took up the challenge that lay in exploring the two extremes at the same time. For a while, the result was chaos. A chaos that required choices and a chaos that made the world around her wonder "What on earth is she up to? Is she completely crazy? Is she going through a mid-life crisis?"

"It was a chaos that required determination and steely will to keep on. I fought through and always had faith I would eventually reach my work identity "behind the façade." I wanted to find out how I could best create meaning in my work-life by being "just me" - totally authentic."

Eileen has never experienced that managers around the conference table take a round to discuss how each are feeling. To listen to what fills people with backgrounds in

various types of work has given her an entirely different dimension. She has absolutely no ambition to move one world into the other. But she has learned how meaningful the inspiration is that is available from human diversity in environments outside the usual working environment. She has learned how important it is for her to have place where she can talk about how she feels and what that is significant for her now. Without being evaluated on whether it is “in” or “out” of scope in relation to her professional role.

“For me, being aware of how I feel brings stability and peace in my life. If I remember to feel, I also know if something is right or wrong for me. But if I put my life on “autopilot,” and manage the process according to performance and results, I lose my bearings. It is not just about responding with the head and the power of thought, but remembering to feel and ask the heart for advice. Even when things are moving quickly. It is about daring to go against the norm if that is what it takes to preserve yourself and your self-respect as the whole person you are. Because the foundation of my life is so stable, I have not been afraid to experiment with my work and take some chances that some might perceive as career hindrances or, at worst, career killers.”

Eileen admits, however, that taking two educations while working full time was a crazy project. She describes it as “unconscious” and almost an expression of a belief from the past that she must “prove” she is good enough. By giving herself a break, with rest and time for reflection, she has found the many different dimensions of her life and tied a new bow. It is now more than a year since she quit her last management job, at Berlingske Media. The year 2008 was a break from “uniforms” and the best present she could give herself. She did not find it difficult to withdraw from the management role, but it was hard to determine who had appreciated her because of her status and who turned out to be “real” friends and relationships. The recognition has been worth it, she believes, and the break gave her the chance to stop and explore the dream that she never thought she would be able to test. The time was just ripe.

“Today, I know much more about who I am and want to be in my professional life. I am looking forward to trying it,” she says. Eileen is quite ready for her next round as the leader in business. This time, she has the soul and heart together with the employer and the competence.

From employee to independent

Over coffee and nuts, we talk about how it was to go from being a corporate manager to an independent con-

sultant - and what the advantages and disadvantages have been for Eileen in the two different types of work.

“For me, it was about reaching a point in my life where I asked too many questions of myself. It had nothing to do with the companies I worked for, but I idealized life outside, and in that way became my own biggest enemy. I kept asking myself if restructuring and termination rounds were what I wanted to spend my life with. Was that what my work should be about? I was good at it, but it was enough for me? Was it my future? Was there enough happiness in that?”

Today, Eileen knows it was also the culmination of 25 years of work, during which she was always on the go and enjoyed the rush of adrenaline. She says it was probably was her age that forced her to try to find answers to the questions she asked herself.

“It quickly becomes very existential when you start to reflect that you have lived more than half of your life and maybe more than two-thirds of your working life. You really just do not think much about that when you are in senior management. There, you just keep going, and there is no time or extra room for the pauses and reflections required to find a way toward fairly acceptable answers to life’s bigger existential challenges. And you are responsible for how you live your life and for the consequences of your choices. That responsibility became more and more obvious for me as time passed; life passed by without me taking the time to find out what the good life would really say to me.”

Eileen thinks it is great to sample life as an independent and have the freedom to choose what sorts of tasks to do and to find out what she wanted to try. She has enjoyed everything from holding workshops on identity and authenticity to board work on HR issues, coaching managers and mentoring young career women. She has also enjoyed spending time developing marketing materials, creating websites, making budgets and business plans and meeting as many people as she has - unlike when she had jobs in which she had to be much more selective and meet only those who were relevant to her work. Not least, she has enjoyed being able to decide how to use her time, to immerse and educate herself, and take many walks with the dog in the morning, and then work at night, instead. Eileen no longer idealizes life outside an organization. 2008 gave her a feeling of inner calm, because she tried her dream and discovered how it really looked.

“It’s hard work being independent. You are responsible for it all: buying stamps, sending invoices, solving IT problems, selling projects, delivering what you sold and doing the accounts. This does not mean it is not hard work to be a senior manager, but there you have colleagues to share sorrows and joy with. I have discov-

ered how lonely it can be to be alone with everything, and how unaccountable I sometimes feel in relation to my duties.”

She tells how she started projects and considered how, if the project did not go well and the client did not like her, she could just not come back. She did not like the feeling. She has missed having a relationship with and, not least, a responsibility to colleagues and associates. Some days, she also has had to kick herself out of the door, and “out there” there was just not the same professional and social community one has in an organization.

“You can’t just ask someone you have a meeting with on Wednesday if they had a good weekend – that’s just misplaced. And you can’t spar professionally with clients, because you are suddenly supposed to be the expert.”

As an independent, Eileen found it hard to bring all of her skills into play. She thinks she has been unable to use all of her HR, commercial and strategic background. On the contrary, as a consultant, she experienced that it was mostly about going in and out of companies and relationships. She felt totally rootless and became very conscious that it is important for her to be part of a community that includes everything from A to Z.

The right decisions

There is only one career decision, Eileen Klitvad has regretted: leaving her post as VP of HR at Telia Denmark during a restructuring.

“I was probably basically confused and afraid of the opportunity that presented itself in the restructuring. I trusted neither my own skills nor my ability to go the distance in the new opportunity. I chose to escape it instead of taking up the fight. Looking back, I am amazed I did not dare, and I cannot help thinking it was some “woman thing” to not believe enough in myself and not dare to jump into the deep water. But the fact is, I did not dare. And I took the consequences of saying “no thanks,” and I have learned something!

It is questionable, however, if we can call this a *career* choice. According to Eileen she has “enormously little career consciousness.”

“I’ve never seen myself as a senior manager, but as someone passionate about what I work for and with. I want to work in a business where I believe I can make a difference to the business and people - a company that needs my skills and my professional and personal experience. I certainly do not sit with a list of ten companies and think I simply must work for one of them. For me, it is about finding an organization in which I can identify with the business standpoint and the organizational culture. That the company is large or small, known or unknown, is less important. The most important thing

is that I should be able to feel the spark, passion or even love, if you will. I must feel my work makes a difference and is appreciated.

Eileen wants to return to a management job. She would like to have responsibility for performance and people again. She would like to make strategy, plan activity and follow assignments to the door along with the rest of the flock. Getting people to work together and be in a professional and social community is more important to her than being able to decide how to spend 100% of her time. She reached the point where her children are leaving the nest and, with her husband, has all she wishes for in her private life.

I ask her who she think will hire her for her next management job and she replies quickly: “It must be a company that dares to take me on.” A company that dares to hire someone like her that questions both life and herself. The company must have courage, she believes.

At the same time, she says the process she has been through over the past four years has given her an inner calm and fewer limits, and has opened her eyes to new and more options. She can choose to become a senior manager, a line manager or specialist within HR, and she can, in principle, also choose to continue as a consultant or even start a practice as a psychotherapist. Although she has neither the intention nor wish to do so, she is sure the skills she has acquired from training as a psychotherapist will be of great benefit to her in a senior management position.

“When you sit in management, you can of course choose how you will prioritize your time and energy, such as deciding much time you will use to seek out other people to talk to or, not least, seek inspiration through the interaction with many different types of people and environments. I have no doubt I will be much more aware in my next management post. I will prioritize cultivating diversity, both in myself as a manager, but also in my way of interacting with colleagues and staff. I think that will enrich both me and my surroundings.

Pause for herself

Eileen took a break - not from herself but for herself - and now she both a reflective person and a woman dressed for business. It is essential for her that she can be both in the same person. She found answers, and, while they may not be conclusive, it was the way forward for her. She is also convinced she is a better sparring partner for those she works with – in both worlds.

“I have several sides, as does everyone. I wish for everyone that they might find the courage to explore different sides of themselves and discover how enriching it is to actually be confronted with oneself.

In my next job, I will be better able to make myself available as a whole person, because I have found a peace around what is right and important for me to choose to spend my professional life on. To test the ideal as an independent, and learn what the reality of that is, has put my professional life in perspective and has made me wiser. And that's really what it is all about for me.

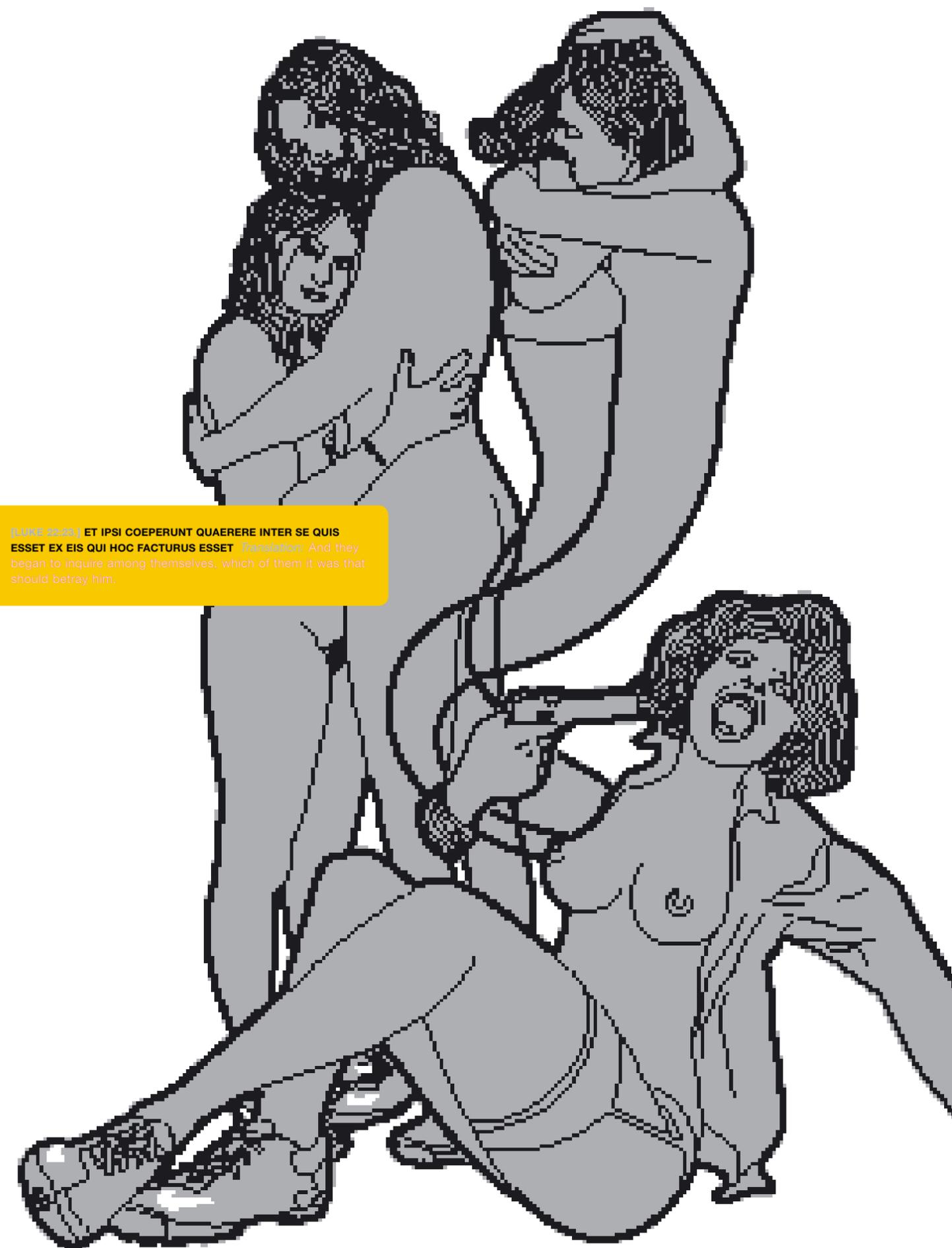
Afterword: As of March 1, Eileen Klitvad became HR director at Zacco, a leading consultancy on intellectual property rights.

GITTE LARSEN holds a master's degree in political science, and is a futurist and editor of the award-winning magazine *FO/futureorientation*, published by the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies. www.fo-online.dk

ABOUT EILEEN KLITVAD

Eileen Klitvad was born in Norway but has lived in Denmark since 1980. She has been married 25 years, and has two sons, age 20 and 23. Her CV includes HR Director jobs in The Coca-Cola Company, Berlingske Media, Telia Denmark and The Nielsen Company. Eileen has always been interested in people, and knew already as a teenager that it was the *human* she wanted to work with. At 18, she applied to nursing school but flunked chemistry. She decided to become a psychologist, but, because she had not yet lived two years in Denmark, could not enter the University of Copenhagen. Impatient, she chose instead five years of economics studies at Copenhagen Business School. Thereafter followed a string of jobs in top management, the first 15 years of which were focused on marketing. Then she switched career tracks to human resources and began a series of continuing education courses. Today, Eileen holds a bachelor's degree and graduate diploma in marketing from Copenhagen Business School, a diploma in clinical industrial psychology from INSEAD and is an ICC Coach, process consultant and psychotherapist.

[LUKE 22:38.] ET IPSI COEPERUNT QUERERE INTER SE QUIS ESSET EX EIS QUI HOC FACTURUS ESSET. Translation: And they began to inquire among themselves, which of them it was that should betray him.



Subscribe to FO

THEMES 2009: #3 - June: Service and product development

FO SUBSCRIPTION: Annual subscription (6 issues): EURO 270 + shipping. This includes two printed copies of each issue and online access to the growing database of FO articles (currently about 200 articles in English from the period 2005-2009).

CONTACT: Ellen Mauri, secretary, per e-mail at ema@cifs.dk or telephone at +45 3311 7176, or Gitte Larsen, Editor, at gil@cifs.dk.

FO IN DANISH: If you prefer your FO in Danish, please contact FO-secretary Ellen Mauri per e-mail ema@cifs.dk or telephone at +45 3311 7176. You can also always find the Danish version on www.cifs.dk/FO