

LOVE THE JOB YOU'RE WITH / The frozen labor market has melted into a jobless recovery, leaving even the people who are still employed feeling stuck. If you can't move on, can you at least make peace? « By Lindsay Van Gelder



THERE ARE TIMES in your life—the ninth month of pregnancy, the annual mammogram, April 14 at the post office—when you just have to suck it up and calmly deal. So now please bring that attitude of Zen acceptance to one of the biggest ongoing challenges of 2010: the jobless recovery.

The long-term unemployed have their own tales to tell. But even people who still have jobs are struggling. They may be more than ready for the next challenge—but with no chance of moving up or out, they need to hold on to the jobs they have without seeming bored. For women in their forties and early fifties, the positions they expected to have moved into by now may simply not be available. For those who were an-

ticipating retirement, their current jobs have become islands of security while they wait for their 401(k)s to come back, the housing market to rally or their grown kids to find work. For all of them, the question is the same: Is there any way to learn to love a job you can't leave?

Susan Kotrady-Mello, a 58-year-old divorced psychiatric nurse from Putney, Vermont, lost \$20,000 in the crash of '08, is still paying off her kids' student loans and is giving financial help to a thirty-something daughter. Kotrady-Mello's working conditions aren't ideal: She says she earns "a third or a quarter of what a doctor makes," puts in a full shift on most holidays and has patients who yell at her and call her names. But she can't

afford to retire. Neither can creative director Jay Young Gerard of Arlington, Virginia, who turned 65 a few months after her employer cut her job to three days a week. A single parent, she has a 25-year-old son who just graduated from college. Her savings were wiped out about five years ago, during a bout of unemployment. No paycheck is not an option.

Rebecca Sesnowich of Tinton Falls, New Jersey, actually did retire early, at 49, in a buyout from a technology

City Harvest, a nonprofit in New York that feeds the hungry. When the organization does have an opening, “we’re seeing hundreds of applicants where we likely would have seen dozens before.”

For the stuck, the question becomes how to make peace with the zeitgeist. Karaman and two of her coworkers cope by keeping a gratitude journal that they pass around the office to help them “focus on what we do have,” she says. In her case, “just knowing that I was providing for my family was em-

the five things I should be most grateful for? After a breast-cancer diagnosis in 2006, she became acutely aware that “things can change in the wink of an eye.” Although it’s not the main reason she is still behind her desk, being on the job feels normal to her, unlike the six months she had to take off for treatments. Showing up for her job “proves to me that everything’s OK,” she says.

Despite their glass-half-full attitudes, the more experienced women are painfully aware that they’re luckier



AS SHE DRIVES home at the end of the workday, she performs a now-regular ritual, asking herself, What are the five things I should be most grateful for?

company. Now 59, she rejoined the workforce, as a human resources administrator at a health club, after discovering that her retirement expenses, including the health insurance that covered her and her self-employed contractor husband, had skyrocketed. Although Sesnowich hopes to retire for good at 65, she’s spending her fifties making money (she also helps pay the college tuition of a niece and nephew) instead of lounging on a beach.

People who aren’t near retirement age are also finding that security is the new black. In a study of 20,000 workers earlier this year, more than half felt there was no clear path to advancement in their current jobs. Yet 44 percent have no plans to leave. Nicole Karaman, 44, who works for a New York City private equity firm, is in this spot. She has wanted to make a career change for a few years, but first came the recession, and then her husband was laid off. Her job pays well. “But it’s always been a case of golden handcuffs,” she says. “Sometimes I get the itch to do something else.”

Some of the happiest people in this sorry economic climate are hiring managers. “We haven’t had a lot of turnover,” says Jilly Stephens, executive director of

powering.” For Kotrady-Mello, the silver lining is her coworkers, a group of women in the nursing unit who are, for the most part, in the same situation she is. They have an esprit de corps that extends beyond working hours. When one of the women turned 60 recently, the others threw her a party. “She’s Greek, and we all dressed up as Greek goddesses,” says Kotrady-Mello. “When she came up the street in her car, there we all were in the middle of the road, dancing.” If someone in the group has a hard day, she can expect a call at the end of her shift from one of the others.

Gerard has always liked her job, and she was blindsided when her hours were cut. But “my mantra since age 11 has been ‘Don’t complain, don’t explain,’” she says. “I feel better when I’m not wallowing.” Instead, she uses her suddenly free time to pursue an interest in fine art. She has had several gallery shows of a year’s worth of photographs she took from her balcony, capturing various aspects of sunrise over the Potomac River. She also makes collages. “My art has brought me tremendous joy,” she says.

As Sesnowich drives home at the end of the workday, she performs a now-regular ritual, asking herself, What are

than people just entering the workforce. Kotrady-Mello’s younger daughter graduated with a degree in fashion merchandising right at the point that those companies stopped hiring; she’s now retraining to enter the beauty salon business. Gerard’s son is an industrial designer facing an economy in which venture capital is scarce. Sesnowich’s nephew is training to be a chef but worries that fewer people can afford a fancy dinner these days. The younger generation’s lousy prospects are, of course, compounded by all the over-40s squatting on whatever jobs are left. Without a significant uptick in the economy, people now in their twenties are primed to be a generation of Prince Charleses, waiting for the throne to be vacated.

But it may also be a good time for workers to take a fresh approach to their long-range goals. Karaman knows that when she is finally able to leave her job, she wants to do something “more meaningful,” preferably teaching. She also loves horses. So she arranged to volunteer at a therapeutic riding program for disabled kids. In the best of all possible worlds, as the economy continues to inch forward, her volunteer work will eventually help her switch careers. Meanwhile, it’s making her happy. 🐾