

The Evening Sun

Wednesday, December 2, 1992

... To terminate your position

I SIT DOWN in my department director's office. He rises from his executive swivel chair, takes four steps to the door and slowly closes it. As his right hand twists the knob, I feel uneasy.

I've never done this before. I don't know how to tell you this. But

**Hillel
Kuttler**

due to the tremendous budget crunch we've been facing, we're going to have to...

My cheeks burn. My palms grip the armrest tighter, grow sweaty. I gulp like a condemned prisoner awaiting the inevitable, fatal bolt.

We've decided to terminate your position. This will take effect on...

Blood rushes to my head and I feel faint. Everything spins. I am inside the revolving cylinder at the circus, my arms falling and rising diagonally like a see-saw, trying to keep my balance as the kaleidoscope ahead races round and round, a million revolutions per second.

This is certainly no reflection at all on you or on the job you've done as our Soviet coordinator.

Is he speaking? Am I listening? Am I here? Is this happening?

Your work is superb. You believe in what you do; it matters to you.

I'm a failure. I screwed up. They're throwing me out on my butt. I've lost it all. Where will I go? What will I do?

This is strictly a financial decision.

The economy is stagnant. There's a recession and I'm out of work. I have to go job hunting again. I'll be a street person.

It's probably 4 in the afternoon, although worldly matters, such as the time, are of no importance now. I'm sinking in the unemployment muck. My shoes are submerged. My ankles, then my pants, now my shirt and tie are muddied. I'm dipping further below, my chin grazing the surface.

I push my body out of the chair, grasp the door knob, head for my

desk and mindlessly resume my tasks. I descend in the elevator and am out on the street. What happened was just a bad, bad dream.

But the bad dream was the bad truth. I really was laid off.

□

The four months since that momentous moment have been a period of introspective conflict.

And nine years removed from college, searching for work — to paraphrase the Navy's recruiting slogan — is not just a job, it's a ven-

justify my degree.

It's new, too, in this way: I determined to shift careers. My mind first clawed, like a squirrel's paws at an acorn, at the core of this dilemma: Does my professional satisfaction lie in the past or future?

Nonprofit work, I concluded after six years in the field, is not "it." I've built a successful career in the nonprofit realms of trade unionism, the Middle East and cultural literacy. But inadequate remuneration and job insecurity — even if irrelevant and reversible — would not compensate for the missing element of long-term professional satisfaction.

Most crucially, I gleaned that which I had long known — that I aspire to be a journalist when I grow up. That I love to write. That feedback on my writing is a wonderful motivator. That hearing "I enjoyed your article" gives my ego the same lift that 50,000 pairs of lungs gave Babe Ruth's as he chugged around the bases.

Feeling the deep imprint of employer's foot on employee's derriere this go-around was my wake-up call. It compelled me to answer the difficult questions: "What will you do for the next 40 years? Resist changing careers, secure in past accomplishments? Or leap off the diving board, as likely, perhaps, to crack your head on the pavement as to jackknife gracefully into the clear blue water below? 'What's it gonna be, boy?' as the narrator's girlfriend moaned in Meat Loaf's "Paradise By the Dashboard Light," "yes... or... no?"

So I drill and drill. It's black outside. The polluted economic clouds and the layoff fallout threaten self-pity rain. But it's black down below, too. There's a gusher waiting to be struck and someone will surely strike it. I know it will be me.

I maintain a sense of humor. When the Soviet Union was slowly dying, I pondered that I'd soon be referred to as my organization's former Soviet coordinator. As it turned out, that's what I am.

Hillel Kuttler writes from Washington.

It's probably 4 in the afternoon, although worldly matters, such as the time, are of no importance now. I'm sinking in the unemployment muck. My shoes are submerged. My ankles, then my pants, now my shirt and tie are muddied.

ture into fog. The trek through Unemployment Alley is a full-time commitment, and eight-hour days are luxuries we job hunters can ill afford.

This is a brand-new experience. They fired me. I had quit my first job in New York to travel the world, the second job for the third, and the third to move to Washington. College? Well, we fired each other — they, to clear room for the next generation of English majors, me, to