

# Women dish about the dreaded 'A' word

## Time for frank discussion about female ambition

Posted By **BONNIE KOGOS**

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I stood on Elgin Street in Sudbury talking to a young professor from Cambrian College. "You must meet my friend Lil Blume," he said. "She'll be in New York City. She leads workshops on communication and ambition issues for Canadian women."

He had me at "ambition." I'd love to meet her, and I did, several weeks later in New York City, over coffee at an outdoor café on Broadway and 73rd St. Lil was in New York with her husband, University of Toronto computer science professor Ron Baecker, who was visiting Columbia U.

We chatted on, arriving at an important topic, ambition for women: all cities and countryside, all domains.

"Women are often ambivalent about owning their ambition and pursuing their goals." Lil said. I nodded vigorously. In our society, women are recognized primarily for their nurturing abilities and sexuality and less so for our intelligence and ideas.

When I first arrived on Manitoulin, a prominent islander told me he thought I was an ambitious woman. I shuddered, nervous at being new on the island and unsure how to take his assessment. All I wanted to do was fit in. I hated being seen as ambitious.

Lil understood. "In our society, women are valued for being good mothers and are also expected to augment the family income," she said. "But having a career in which a woman achieves leadership and power can conflict with her identity as a nurturer. While many women have careers and positions of leadership, ambition still causes some shuddering.

"Ambition is not a source of conflict for men, because leadership and career-focus is congruent with their traditional identity as providers. The ambivalence that women feel about ambition can be subconscious."

"Is it so bad to feel ambivalent about ambition?" I ask.

"Yes, ambition is a combination of the desire for mastery, skills and excellence," she said.

"And also the willingness to be recognized for these achievements. Women desire excellence as much as men. We want to be knowledgeable, skilful and wise. The ambivalence comes from the recognition part of ambition. Women are taught to encourage and provide recognition to others. They feel less comfortable accepting recognition for their achievements."

I told Lil that in my travel office, women travel agents do better than men, and I've heard both men and women say, "Oh, she's so pushy, so ambitious!"

"The problem with ambition," Lil said, "is that other people think you're out for yourself, but it's more complicated than that. You can be ambitious for your community, your workplace, your family -- and yourself. It's OK for men to be ambitious for themselves -- in fact, they are criticized if they're not."

In Lil's workshop, "Women and Ambition," which she has led from St. John's to Victoria, she provides examples of well-known Canadian women, from a former attorney general of Ontario to a university president, all of whom shy away from accepting recognition in its various forms.

"Their humility is admirable," she said. "But this affects their ability to earn income and minimizes the importance of their positions." We ordered more coffee.

In her book, *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in a Woman's Changing Life*, New York City psychiatrist Anna Fels reflects on her women clients. Many were successful professionals. Fels found at the root of their depression, self-doubt and ambivalence about their success. Inspired by Fels's research, Lil created an interactive workshop to help women get in touch with their attitudes towards goal-setting and ambition.

Lil's website, [www.lilblume.ca](http://www.lilblume.ca), explains how these workshops started. The workshop was created originally for women in science and engineering.

"Women grad students in the sciences are a particularly good group to coach. They have enough skills and confidence to enter male-dominated fields, often out of their passion for science.

"My goal is to encourage them to keep their jobs even after starting a family. If they quit, as they often do when the first baby comes along, 10 years later they're bored and miserable, wishing they were back in the workforce."

Lil's goal is to stop the loss of women in career areas that would benefit from their presence. When women quit these jobs, there are fewer role models for younger women. Bravo!

Ambition requires being brave enough to set and pursue goals, even though we may fail.

"Research shows 95 per cent of people think goal-setting is a good idea," Lil said. "But only three per cent actually set goals and follow through with them. If this is true, there may be a dark side to goal-setting that no one is addressing. Bringing this dark side to the surface can help us deal with underlying fears rationally."

Feedback from *The Dark Side* workshop includes: "I was nervous about coming to this session, as goal-setting is stressful to me. But I found this very helpful and thought-provoking. It's good to talk about the silence around women's right to and need for goals."

Another woman wrote, "Better than caffeine."

Lil and I finish our own caffeine fix and promise to meet in Toronto when I come north.

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