



**Kira Vermond**  
demystifies money

# Under-earning doesn't pay

When it comes to not earning high enough salaries, we can be our own worst enemies. After all, if we don't value ourselves, how can we expect others to?

**N**ot long before she died last year of cancer at age 63, my mother asked me to give the eulogy at her funeral. "Of course," I answered from beside her hospital bed, not really wanting to think about what I was agreeing to.

But weeks later I was at my desk in the middle of the night, trying to convey all the wonderfully messy and contradictory ways she lived her life. As I wrote about her childhood farm, her garden and the way she kneaded bread, I also realized I had to speak about the types of jobs she chose.

My mother worked for charities that helped the blind, fed the hungry and clothed the poor. She worked for libraries, not-for-profits and churches. Without fail, she chose jobs that were extraordinarily meaningful and important on a societal level. But she also found only work that paid very poorly.

Looking at that list that night, I discovered a new appreciation for my mom (and for the generally low-paid profession of community worker). But I also realized that for as long as my smart, creative, educated mother had worked, she suffered serious self-esteem issues when it came to her career. I remember asking her once why she wouldn't apply for a position that sounded perfect for her, and she simply replied, "I can't do that job."

She fit the classic description of an "under-earner."

An under-earner is "anyone who earns less than she needs or desires, often despite her efforts to do otherwise," says Barbara Stanny, the American author of *Overcoming Underearning: A Five Step Plan to a Richer Life*. Under-earners often can't pay their bills, have few assets, do a lot of unpaid work and rarely save for the future. This, in a nutshell, was my mother.

According to Stanny, being an under-earner is fundamentally an issue of not valuing yourself. "We give away our skills, knowledge, experience and wisdom for free or at bargain

prices because there's a little voice in our heads that says, 'Who do you think you are? You don't deserve more than that,'" she says.

Cathy-Anne O'Brien, a 37-year-old head of a small public-relations company in Toronto, admits she hasn't asked for raises in the past, even when she should have. Now that she has a small child, she speculates there's another reason why women, often the primary caregivers in the family, don't ask for more. "I wonder if by asking for that money we feel like we're asking for more responsibility and therefore taking time away from what's important at home," she says.

Then there's another kind of fear. Danielle Lovell, 25, from Calgary, has a psychology degree from Yale that cost her parents US\$160,000. Since graduation she has worked at low-paying but eco-friendly jobs paying under \$28,000. She would love to make more.

"I've been a high achiever all of my life, so looking at a job I'm not familiar with and that won't come easily to me right away is kind of scary," says Lovell. In a weird way, perfectionism doesn't always make us strive for big careers, big responsibilities or big salaries. Instead it can hold us back because we're so afraid of looking bad.

It's this fear of being uncomfortable that is the main reason women don't earn what they should, says Stanny. But it's time to tackle it, even if we start out small. Because if we don't get over ourselves and start applying for higher-wage jobs, asking for raises or negotiating better salaries, we are never going to realize our potential to earn the money we deserve – and our self-respect, too. ■

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