

## Midlife Reflections of a Working Mother

(CAMWS Graduate Student Issue Committee panel, April 2008)

Thank you all for coming, especially at what for some of us central-timers is long past our bedtime. The first thing I have to say, alas, is that you really shouldn't be here, both because sleep is the most precious of all commodities and because one of my rules of life is to save time by Just Saying No to time-management seminars. The second thing is that I really shouldn't be here: giving a talk on balancing work and family implies that I've done it, thereby painting a large red bulls-eye on my heart for Nemesis to aim at. It's like a Hollywood couple appearing on the cover of Good Housekeeping magazine (anyone out there old enough to remember Burt and Loni?). Furthermore, the formula I've managed to cobble together is a product of my own personality and circumstances, and it may not be transferable. But since we're all here, I might as well spend the next 14 minutes sharing some thoughts about my 12 years as a working mother, 9 years as a working mother of 2, and 6 years as a working mother of 3. The major themes of this talk will be time, guilt, and love.

Let's start with the good news about academia: the hours. Most professional women would kill for a schedule with a mere 6-12 hours a week in the classroom, often clumped on two or three days, with 20 weeks per annum of vacation. Moreover, many of our tasks can be done at home while children are sleeping or otherwise occupied. On a 1-10 scale of compatibility with child-rearing, college teaching is probably at least a 7 (at my old job we used to call this the Bo Derek scale, but now no one has the slightest idea what I'm talking about).

As an introduction to the bad news, however, allow me to quote from a Baby Blues cartoon, a strip especially dear to my heart because I found out I was pregnant with my third child right when Wanda and Darryl did (though my Nathaniel is now 6 and their Wren is still a baby—go figure). At any rate, Wanda begins: "OK, today is pizza day for Zoe's class, so I don't have to make her lunch. Hammie wants three slices of baloney and mayonnaise on his sandwiches, cut diagonally. You asked for roast beef, and I have some of those sourdough rolls you like in the freezer. Zoe needs to take 16 cupcakes to school, eight with orange frosting, and eight with blue frosting. I can drop them off at 9:45 on my way to Wren's doctor appointment at ten. With any luck, I'll be back here at 11:30 to meet the plumber, then I pick up Zoe and Hammie from school fifteen minutes early so we can get to their dentist appointments, and on the way home we'll buy some new furnace filters and get your brown jacket at the cleaners." Darryl interjects, "That's amazing!" "Huh?" replies Wanda. Darryl queries, "How do you keep all that information in your head, and still have room for all the other stuff?" With rounded eyes, Wanda asks, "What other stuff?"

That, in a nutshell, is the problem. Don't get me wrong: motherhood is a great joy and not for one second have I regretted my decision to take that plunge. But it is also an endless stream of trivial things to be done and remembered; having a paying job in addition does not exempt you from any of them. There is nothing more wearying than dealing with fussy, quarreling children. And just when you feel that you've finally got things under control and can do your own work, a child comes home with a temperature of 102. This is true even if you're blessed with high-performance, low-

maintenance children; working motherhood of children with special needs I can revere but not really imagine. You never know what you're going to get. But it's certain that, once the first baby is born, you will never be able to throw yourself into an intellectual project or anything else with the kind of intensity you did before—or at least, not till the last kid leaves home (I'll get back to you on that in a decade or so). Conversely, having a job means that you can't devote yourself entirely to homemaking either, though the health of society depends upon the sacrifices of those who have (did you hear that guilt?). But for whatever reason, there are, I think, those who would not be happy doing just one because they are in fact called to do both. My assignment is to share some thoughts about what that is like.

In the 6 weeks following September 18, 1995, when my beautiful healthy baby daughter came into the world, my terror, sleep-deprivation, and sheer physical misery were so overwhelming that I felt as if I would never be happy again. I was lucky if I could manage to brush my hair and my teeth in the same 12-hour period, let alone have a meaningful thought about an ancient text. But everyone told me it would get better, and it did; when at seven weeks I stopped nursing (which had been nothing but agony), and she started smiling and sleeping through the night, the sun came out again. If this were twelve years ago, with me a new mom on the third year of the tenure track, I'd be telling you tales of squeezing research out of every drop of her nap-time, reading the *Aeneid* in the grocery store parking lot because she'd fallen asleep in her car-seat, writing a learned note on neoteric sorcery as she lay beside me in the recliner because I knew she'd waken if I moved. Teaching is a bit like parenting, in that you do the best you can with what you have available, bluffing as necessary; children always grow up, semesters always end. Research is an entirely different story: if you're on the tenure track where publications are required, there's an external, somewhat arbitrary but nevertheless objective standard that has to be met. The stakes are unbelievably high: the prize is worth about 3 million dollars, and it's winner take all. Insofar as one has control over these things, there's a lot to be said for waiting to have children until your publication program is sufficiently advanced that you can exceed the tenure requirements even if your disposable time drops to 10 or 20 percent of what it was.

Remembering those stressful years gives me the willies, so let's move on to the present. Though the baby and toddler days had many rewards, it's also very nice having school-aged children who can brush their own teeth (I'd much rather change diapers than brush other people's teeth). The point of view now is of one a little more than halfway through the journey of life, but just halfway through the era of having children at home.

As promised: time. The thing about time is that there is not enough of it. I've heard that when asked how much money would allow them to live comfortably, most people will answer, about 20% more than they have; I've often felt that about time. With a mere 4.8 additional hours in each day, 1.5 for sleeping and 3.3 for waking, life would be quite manageable; but my proposal has not hitherto been accepted. There's a column in our local paper called "The Everyday Cheapskate," rapidly being supplanted by one called "Frugal Living" (maybe the language police decided that cheapskates ought to be a protected group); there's a huge profit to be made if someone could sell a program that does for time what these well-meaning souls do for money. The Everyday Cheapskate is not to be confused, incidentally, with "The Extraordinary Cheapskate," though the line

may be blurred; what seems to some the temporal equivalent of clipping coupons may seem to others the temporal equivalent of re-using dental floss.

The working mother is constantly involved in complex prioritization and re-prioritization according to her personal utility function, trying to decide which activities are productive and/or enjoyable and to eliminate those which are neither. For me, this means Just Saying No to, e.g., nail polish, gardening, and pets—yet for others those same items are positive pleasures and therefore worth cultivating. Valuing time spent on unrewarding activities at \$100/hour helps to eliminate some temporal leakage; it's not worth 15 minutes to me to save \$5, for instance. Yet others may find clipping coupons essentially recreational and therefore worth it. My point is that the less disposable time one has, the more intentional one needs to be about evaluating what merits the expenditure of that resource and what does not. Many of my shortcuts happen to fall in the area of food, and some here would find them appalling: let's just say that my most-thumbed cookbook is entitled *Especially for Him: A Beginner's Cookbook for Men*, in which every dish receives a rating of Moderately Easy, Easy, or Very Easy.

On the other hand, when the children become old enough to participate in the myriad chores of running a household, the rules begin to change. (That's one thing about child-rearing: just when you've finally got things figured out, the conditions change.) Here's my variation on the old "give a man a fish" adage: Vacuum the living room and it'll remain clean for 10 minutes; teach a child to vacuum the living room and it'll still remain clean for 10 minutes, but in the 15 it takes them to do it you could grade a quiz and send two emails. Furthermore, whatever cockeyed ideas Zeus may have about his offspring being greater than himself, my twelve-year-old daughter's superiority to her mother in matters culinary is a source of delight to us all. Unlike me, Natalie has the time, the skill, and the desire to cook things right, an atavistic trait I believe she inherited from her paternal grandmother; I can now give dinner parties in full confidence that her oven-baked chicken and toffee-chip chocolate cake will be the stars of the show. It's almost always easier, at first, simply to do things than to teach children to do them and have to spend twice as long trouble-shooting; but in the long run, it's worth the investment, for parents' and children's sake.

What makes the working motherhood enterprise possible, ultimately, is that the majority of tasks required for human survival, especially the acquisition, preparation, consumption, and disposal of food, can be done with children. Before I had kids, grocery shopping was a chore; with a baby or toddler, it's an activity. I've spent many a blissful hour with an infant in a grocery cart reaping smiles from passersby, receiving stimulation from those bright cans and boxes and mother's kisses and commentary; and if the little one should happen to become discontented, that's OK, because it's a necessary task and it was dead time anyway. (Grocery shopping with multiple children is another story, but I'll suppress that memory for now.)

"Dead time" is another candidate for the language police, and rightly so; in the light of eternity, it's probably the time that matters more—people at the end of their lives do not generally regret spending too much time with their children. But one of the side effects of working motherhood is the inevitable classification of time. "Precious research time" (PRT) comprises those hours and minutes when children are either asleep or under the care of someone else; this is to be used for reading, writing, sleeping, contemplation, and adult interaction requiring concentration or privacy. But with the time I'm in charge

of the kids, I can be sloppy and relaxed. I've talked to many a stay-at-home mom who is grateful for mother's-day-out—a cheap, church-run, half-day day-care once or twice a week, and my salvation—because she can really get her shopping done and her house clean. For me, using PRT for that sort of task is like drawing blood. Now that my kids are in school all day, it's not necessary to be quite so obsessive, but the habit is hard to break.

And there is a grave risk associated with this strategy: that the kids will think of mom as a doer of chores who never focuses solely on them. This is a problem I still wrestle with. One can ameliorate it by outsourcing as much as possible, hiring a maid and a gardener, for instance—an advantage of two incomes is being able to afford stuff like that. One can try to make the chores joint activities: if they won't help fold laundry or clean their rooms for the pure joy of it, bribery can often be invoked. Cunning is also useful: "I bet there aren't more than 20 items on the floor there for you to put away." Five minutes later, "No way, Mom, there were 36—see, I proved you wrong!" "OK, you win." (Many of these strategies are also applicable to teaching, by the way; that's another paper.) But it's also essential to schedule some time each day when multitasking is forbidden. For me, the most natural venue for this is reading to them, with one child only nestled beside me in the recliner. Those are the happiest hours. The newborn stage once seemed endless; but here at the *meta*, I've started to feel with sharpening pangs how short and how precious is the time I have left with them. When the grief of impending loss breaks over me, it's the empty recliner that hits me hardest.

In addition to inviolate parent-child routines, I've also found it essential to cling to certain solitary rituals, according to the hallowed principle, "If Mama ain't happy ain't nobody happy." My most important shield against a host of physical and spiritual ills—and culinary ones too; hunger is the best sauce—has always been exercise, which thanks to free audiobooks on my iPod also includes a daily dose of non-classical literature. One member of the child-care staff at the Coppell Aquatic and Recreation Center, a YMCA equivalent, developed such a strong bond with my children (who went there several days a week for an hour or two) that I still receive email from her—and we moved away 5 years ago. If one is lucky enough to be able to avoid or postpone all-day daycare, which carries a heavy price in dollars, illnesses, and guilt, such small parcels of child care provide a cheap and refreshing outlet for all concerned.

The other no-compromise principle is daily time alone with my husband, about which just three quick observations: first, that the best thing you can do for your children is to spend time and energy on your marriage; second, that if you both make the other's happiness a priority, then you'll both be happy, and if you don't then neither of you will be; and third, that refusing to own a television helps to ensure that your spouse will be your primary source of entertainment. On our Just Say No list, television is at the very top.

Let me close with some final thoughts about love. If you have children, despite all the manifold frustrations and disappointments, you will love them and delight in them; that's how we're made. The cultivated bond with the likes of Homer and Virgil, however, can be more easily broken. You'll be able to toggle between alter egos only if both have a powerful tug at your heart, if you take almost as much delight in your dead white guys as you do in your flesh-and-blood children. Doing both means that you may not be able to do either as well as you might have; and yet, for mommy to have a rich and

rewarding life outside the home can at least potentially enrich everyone's life inside the home. And there is one professional benefit to the dual identity, an advantage that comes from being not merely academics but humanists. Motherhood is unlikely to make a woman a better mathematician; but it will help her to understand the conflict between duty and desire, to enter deeply into the love and suffering that animates most important literature. Obviously, parenthood is not the only road to understanding these things: think of virginal Virgil. Yet it is *a* way. Would J. K. Rowling have been able to depict so forcefully the maternal love on which her plot turns if she had not lived it from the inside?

I'd love to go on, but time is short and I feel guilty for keeping you up. So let me close with the famous ending of Robert Frost's poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time" (tramping in mud is another thing—but never mind):

But yield who will to their separation,  
My object in living is to unite  
my avocation and my vocation  
as my two eyes make one in sight.  
Only when love and need are one  
and the work is play for mortal stakes  
is the deed ever really done  
for heaven and the futures' sakes.