

Family and Career: Finding That Sweet Spot in Life

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In 2003, I wrote a CareerTalk column on “Having It All.” I was all gung ho about personal and professional strategies for sustaining the magic triumvirate of Marriage-Family-Career. What I failed to anticipate then was just *how much* the constant disruptions associated with being a parent and caregiver would limit my productivity and contribute to a loss in research momentum. Yes, I did find childcare—a wonderful woman who is still very much involved with our family today. But short of giving your child away for adoption, the simple fact is that there are some things in life you can’t outsource. Just do the math. Spend several hours every day or night taking care of a baby or infirm parent who requires 24/7 care. Mix in sleep deprivation and something has to give. Some people estimate that productivity drops by 20%. It’s probably closer to 33-50% for nursing mothers.

It didn’t help that my maternity leave came out of my research time. As it turned out, most of the time I gave to my family ended up coming out of what would have been research time. The bottom line, though, was that I wanted and chose to spend time with my children. As my girls grew to be toddlers and preschoolers, they no longer required 24/7 supervision, but they started to notice that I was gone a lot of the time. I remember my little one asking me why I had to always go to work and I told her that I took care of sick people. So, she started telling me that she was sick very matter of factly, like “I’m happy,” “I’m sad,” “I’m sick.” It was her way of telling me that she wanted me to stay with her, and I thought, now that is sad.

I discovered a new capacity to multi-task. There is something to be said about multi-tasking—it sometimes means you do a half-good job at everything. Mentally, I was not prepared for the concessions I was having to make, resulting in an constant sense of guilt and inadequacy. I read countless articles about “work-life balance.” The problem was, balance wasn’t the problem—at least in my life. Balance implies a state of equilibrium...a sense of being centered. The problem was that I didn’t have enough hours in a day to do justice to any part of my life. I had a job, family, and marriage, all of which I loved. I didn’t want to be just

“balanced” or just tread water. I wanted to be excellent at all three. Trying to be balanced only made me feel worse as I struggled to achieve something that unattainable. Nothing was ever enough. I was always feeling guilty, whether I was leaving work or leaving home.

Dynamic equilibrium? Homeostasis? I’m not sure there is a phrase to describe the situation of trying to maintain stability while coping with the fluidity of day-to-day life of those of us trying to raise a family or care for aging parents. In reality, the demands change not only day-to-day, but year-to-year or semester-to-semester. In preschool, I could simply drop my children off in the mornings. Now that they are 8 and 10, they are busy with friends, homework, and extracurricular activities that demand a new kind of attention and even more of my time.

So, if life is always "off-balance," what do you do—Juggle? Another misnomer. Most people think of juggling as keeping a series of objects in the air by alternately tossing and catching them. In life, this means keeping two or more activities going at a time. Honestly, though, it’s like driving a car while talking on your cell phone. Your eyes are on the road, but you are not fully focused. Nor are you concentrating on the conversation. You’re focused on keeping things in the air, not on the task itself. Which brings me to another definition for juggling—“deception,” as in juggling numbers. Many of us fool ourselves into thinking that we can or ought to be “doing it all.” In reality, you can’t. At least, not all by yourself and not all at the same time. And so you learn to delegate, to triage, to go with the flow.

Still, something was not right. Two years ago, I made the decision to leave academics and take a part-time position at a local, tertiary care community hospital-based multi-specialty group located about one mile from my old institution. I left my old job in part because it was making me so unhappy that I was unhappy at home, too. Work had become oppressive and a place of constant conflict—conflict that I began internalizing and bringing home with me. I realized that in all those years of focusing on being a mother, physician-scientist, and wife (yes, in that order), I was personally stagnating. And I could not ignore the negative effects on my family. But, taking a part-time job was merely coincidence. A call came in from an old friend and I thought, why not?

When I first started my new job, I was afraid of turning into some kind of widget-counting doctor-robot churning out a constant stream of COPD and asthma patients. However, I've rediscovered how fascinating and demanding pulmonary medicine can be outside of the ICU. The job is intellectually challenging and emotionally fulfilling in ways I did not expect. I love my patients (well, most of them) and I think they like me, too. The other day, some of my favorites came in and I got a real kick out of their smiles. After 2 years, it's nice to be developing meaningful relationships with them. Yes, I have bad and sometimes very bad days at work, but at 50% time, there is enough time to recharge my psyche so that emotionally I have plenty to give to my family and my patients.

I sometimes miss the daily flexibility of academic life. When I'm in clinic, there is no way to leave or reschedule short of an "act of God." But the day-to-day flexibility of faculty life was deceptive. Taking time off meant decreased "face time," less interaction with colleagues, the kind of unscheduled contacts that help to generate those idea flashes needed to spark creativity. I was always thinking about the next grant, the next paper, even when I was with my children. Yes, I could work after the children were put to bed, but that meant less quality time with my spouse. I was just talking with someone else the other day about how another unanticipated consequence about going into part-time practice is how much more settled my family life has become since I started my new job. It is kind of a relief not to have to consciously schedule "quality time" with my children. Sometimes, we just hang out together! As a part-time out-patient doc, I try to get all my paperwork and calls done before I go home. When I hang up my coat at the end of the day, I am truly done. Sure, I carry my beeper and am available for calls and urgent lab results. But for the most part, when I am home, I am focused on the tasks at hand. I am more efficient and relaxed. Instead of always feeling like I am just treading water, I feel like I have a chance to do some real good in life—for my family, my patients, and, surprise, myself!

There are moments when I feel resentful or wistful. There was much that I loved about academics and still miss. I miss the lab and the fellows. It is sometimes grating that I was the one who "compromised" and left academics for a part-time job. I envy my husband who seemingly does not have the same existential struggle with fatherhood and working full-time.

But overall, life is good and I have no regrets. Perhaps the most amazing thing is that I actually have moments now when I am really happy. For me, it may be something as simple as those first few minutes when I pick up my girls from school and we walk hand-in-hand to the car as they chatter excitedly about their day. If I am happy, my family is happy...and if they are happy, that makes me happy, and so on and so forth. A positive feedback loop!!

In writing this essay, I spent a great deal of time trying to figure out some bit of wisdom or catchy quote that would trigger an epiphany for the reader, "So that's how it's done!" But, as you can see, my journey has not been an efficient one. There have been no "aha!" moments, except in retrospect. My other choice for a title for this essay was "Letting Go of the Guilt." The hardest part has not been about making choices but the soul-searching honesty that led me to make those choices. I also am very aware that the journey is not over. My children are rapidly approaching adolescence (!!) and my parents are becoming more infirm. As life changes, my needs and those of my family and career will evolve as well. For now, I have found a certain sweet spot in life and am very grateful to have a job that has allowed me to maintain my sense of vitality and self. Life has become a sense of possibilities once more.

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