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Work and Motherhood -- Still Hazy After All These Years

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I've never liked the term: working mother. It says that I am some kind of sub-category; not a full member of the club. Maybe I'll feel better about it the day I hear someone called a "working father."

The label combines a bit of praise for super-human effort with a whiff of disapproval for the fact balancing work and family means someone is getting short changed.

I was on the front lines of that conflict for many years. Then one day, I simply declared a truce.

We've been at this whole women and work thing for several decades now. Impressive degrees, upward-trajectory jobs and cracks in the glass ceiling say that on a lot of levels, the promise of female economic emancipation is coming along quite nicely.

We have been to the mountaintop. So why are so many troubled by the view?

Working mother discontent is clear in the recent Pew study that found 60 percent of mothers would rather have part time jobs. You hear it in the furious debate that has raged since *New York Times'* Lisa Belkin first wrote about the "opt-out revolution" in 2003. "Why," she asked, "don't women run the world? Maybe they don't want to"

Almost five years later, we're still trying to figure ourselves out. Four major books have just hit the stands, attempting to deconstruct why mothers leave work, why they stay, and how they can come back - if, in fact, they want to come back at all.

The position on the right: women are leaving work to do what God and nature intended. This whole career thing was a feminist fabrication all along.

On the left: women executives are being pushed out by heartless, clueless, corporations that value productivity over parenting. A bit farther to the left is the argument that the longings of motherhood are simply programmed in like code during upbringing - mothers

aren't born; they're socialized. The real barrier is not the glass ceiling of a corporation. It's the front door of the home.

Here is my contribution to the body of anecdotal evidence. Feel free to put me on a chart.

Since my earliest days, I wanted success as a researcher. I wanted to be in all the best journals. I wanted to discover great things and write books about what I learned.

I never even thought about being a mother. But then early in my 30s, it was all I thought about. Unlike today, that was the age when most women reached their go/no-go decision on having children. This was not a conscious choice. It was an emotional - even physical - need. Every tick of my biological clock sounded like a rifle shot.

We had a son. And much later in life, adopted a baby girl. And that whole world-class research thing? It's still here, and as insistent and time-consuming as ever.

What made my emotional struggle especially difficult was that my life wasn't. My husband did quite well quite early. Basically, I didn't have to do much I didn't want to. So stretching ligaments to embrace both work and domesticity, I know, must leave many without my options asking: "Woman - are you nuts?"

Maybe. But I'm not alone. High-achieving, goal-oriented women usually don't look for husbands who can take care of them. They want husbands who can team up with them. Those kinds of men tend to have careers that afford choices.

Compared to the past, these are somewhat enlightened times for men and households. They know what a washing machine does, that clothes will never crawl to the hamper no matter how long you leave them on the floor, and that the bristly end of the broom is the one that pushes the dust around. Importantly, new studies show they are spending more time with their children than ever before.

But studies also show that homes still run on woman-power.

In my years as a gender scholar at Stanford, doing extensive face-to-face research, I muscled equipment and materials up steep and countless steps of homes in San Francisco for hours of conversations.

And I remember, like so many other women, coming home to a parallel universe, with a whole different set of deadlines, demands and responsibilities. I loved that world. But I would ask my husband -quite often, quite loudly, and occasionally profanely - why does everything always fall to me?

In response, I would hear (all together now) "I do more than any husband I know."

And I always wondered: why are you measuring yourself against people who don't live here? And how do you even know? Do you guys sit around and talk about these things? Does washing the most dishes that week earn the same alpha points as being the longest off the tee?"

I was an unwilling conscript in the mommy wars. But I found a way out.

I accepted the fact that motherhood was not the choice. Work was. And if I wanted that choice, I would have to embrace the chaos - I would have to be the chaos - even if that meant occasionally showing up to lecture medical students wearing two different shoes.

My moment of enlightenment happened at the end of a very bad day.

We were away from home, getting ready for visiting-day at my daughter's summer camp. There were athletic feats to applaud and crafts to compare to the great works of civilization.

Suddenly, my husband doubled over in pain.

We decided to travel the hour back to San Francisco so he could see his own doctor. They said they would do some tests, and everything would be fine. I should be with my daughter.

So, it was back to camp. I was almost there, when I got a call that my husband was not so fine after all. He had a very angry appendix, and was about to go to surgery. He wanted me there when he was wheeled in.

So virtually within site of the cabins, I headed back toward a comforted husband, and away from a very angry daughter.

In a perfect juncture of teenage logic and virtuoso ability to play the harp strings of a mother's emotions, she sobbed: "how can you go back to the hospital when you know how upset I am that dad is in the hospital?"

My grown son piled on, angry that nobody (me) had called him earlier. And when I got home, our yellow lab, Stuart, had expressed his displeasure at being left alone so long with lethal efficiency.

By 1 a.m., my husband and his appendix had said their good-byes; my daughter's tears had stopped; my son had been assured he was still the go-to guy in family emergencies; all evidence of Stuart's anxieties had been scrubbed clean. As for me, I was making my way through the pile of paperwork I had intended to start early in the evening of the previous day.

I was frazzled. I was tired. I was irritated. But I was content in the way you are when your choices are your own, and they take you to a place you accept and understand.

No book, no research, no trend line was going to tell me anything I didn't already know. I work. I'm a mother. And on this day from hell, I was exactly where I needed -- and wanted -- to be.