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The Multiple Identities of a Mathematics Professor Mom¹

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Synopsis

In this essay, I dive into the multiple identities of a Mathematics Professor Mom and how we interchange those identities as we work to achieve harmony (not balance!) in our lives.

As Mathematics Professor Moms, we have multiple identities. We have to. Sometimes we're the teacher. Sometimes we're the nurturer. Sometimes the advisor. Sometimes we're the "come on, let's get real" person. Sometimes we're the harsh realities. Sometimes we're the peacemaker. Sometimes we need a peacemaker. Most often we're told that in order to have a successful work-life balance you leave work at work and home at home. Reality, though, doesn't allow for this. Life in higher education, no matter your rank or role, doesn't allow for it. Motherhood doesn't allow for separate identities at all. In this essay, I dive into the multiple identities of a Mathematics Professor Mom and how we interchange those identities as we work to achieve harmony (not balance!) in our lives.

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As I sat down to put the rest of this essay together, I'm struck by the serenity of the current situation of my house. My six (and a half—she'll yell at me if I forget that half) year old is taking a nap in the other bed in her room because she actually made her bed this morning and didn't want to mess it up. My four and a half year old finally gave up and is also taking a nap with his eyes open because he's convinced me that he has a special ability to sleep with his eyes open. My twenty month old is downstairs in the basement with my partner-in-crime and husband because he already took his nap this morning. Except I hear no playing or laughter, so I'm pretty sure they're both snuggled up on the couch taking a nap together as a soccer or football game is on the cable-free TV. My fifteen year old miracle dog, who has been dying of kidney failure for over a year (with no interventions), is sleeping soundly in our room, and our other twelve year old miracle dog, who got hit by a car on Christmas day this past year and survived, is cuddled up next to me. Our kitchen is clean. The laundry is caught up. Packages from the holiday season have found their homes. The floors are clutter-free and cleaned, thanks to our trusty robot vacuum, Randy.

I have to laugh as I write this because this is NOT usually what our house or my life is like. Yet here I am, writing an essay about mathematics and motherhood, and it seems a little too good to be true. In fact, you know what it is? It's that random time you draw the most perfect circle on the board. You didn't mean to. You didn't try to. You just happened to and it was perfect. And you don't want to erase it. But in the end, you have to. Because you have to make room for more. Or you have to move on. But you'll always be left with the great feeling that the most random, perfect circle happened today. Right now, I'm cherishing this most perfect moment where I can sit and finish putting together this paper. (And as I finish writing this, the six year old sneaks downstairs for after-nap cuddles... seriously. Now this is more like it... now I can comfortably finish writing.)

As a mother of four children and a recently-promoted full professor, employed at a very research-intensive university, I often get asked "How do you do it all?" Or "You must have really great work-life balance." Or even still, "Margaret you need to slow down, you're making us all look bad." Sometimes even I look back and wonder, "How do I do it all? How do I get things done?" (And yes, I sleep at night!!) In my reflections, I always come back to three things:

1. I don't do it all;
2. I recognize and embrace my multiple identities; and
3. I wouldn't be where I am today had I not become a mother during my academic tenure.

What follows is my personal journey of navigating the multiple identities that comes with being a mathematics professor mom. This is not meant to be a self-help or how-to article. It is meant to recognize that we all have our different journeys, and those journeys shape us into who we are today and the choices we make and will make for ourselves, our careers, and our families. First though, let's briefly set the context for identities.

Understanding Identity

The way a person acts, interacts, or reacts in certain situations is recognized by others. When other people perceive these actions and interactions, they recognize it as a "kind of person". For example, as mathematicians, we are often recognized as "math nerds", smart, professor, teacher, etc. "The 'kind of person' one is recognized as 'being', at a given place and time, can change from moment to moment in the interaction, can change from context to context, and of course, can be ambiguous or unstable" [1, page 99]. The "kind of person" in this context is what I mean by identity in this essay.

What's important to understand about identity here is that we have multiple identities that are connected to how we interact with society [1], and how those interactions shape who we are. This latter component is what is known as our *figured worlds* [3]. The notion of figured worlds focuses on how people participate in socially and culturally constructed contexts (see for example [2, Chapter 3]). How a person constructs the figured worlds they live in can impact the figured worlds and the identities they create and recreate. Moreover, the ways a person interacts within the figured worlds are partly due to their experiences in other figured worlds, and partly independent of these experiences and due to outside forces [2]. Thus, because each individual enters figured worlds with different experiences and experiences the figured worlds differently, identity development in figured worlds emphasizes the interactions within the figured world [3].

For the purposes of this essay, there are two figured worlds—being a mathematician and motherhood. How our identities are developed within those figured worlds depends upon the positions offered, the positions claimed, and the negotiations that occur, often having to negotiate across the two figured worlds. How these varied positions are reconciled ultimately shapes our identities.

The remaining part of this essay is organized into major positions I personally have negotiated in my journey as being both a professor in academia and a mother. These positions have ultimately shaped my identity as a “mathematics professor mom”.

Work-Life “Balance”

Quite often when we read a book about productivity, or one on the world’s most “successful” people, or whatever other work-success book we can choose, we are told that in order to be successful at work and at home, we have to have balance. We have to have two separate figured worlds—a work world and a home world. We have to leave work at work and leave home at home. But motherhood does not allow for that. While there can be, and arguably should be some separation, it is not always reasonable to expect there to be all the time. In my own work, in all the work-life and productivity reading I’ve done, and in my own reflections, I always converge on an argument not for balance, but rather harmony. And through that harmony comes sincerely embracing our multiple identities as Mathematics Professor Moms.

We cannot only wear our work hat at work and our home hat at home. Oftentimes our identities cross over. Sometimes we’re the nurturer at work and then turn around and are the nurturer at home three hours later. Sometimes we’re the “let’s get real” people — our own children need to face reality or our students. Sometimes we’re the peacemaker at home—when we’re helping our children navigate the concept of taking turns and consoling them after a long day at school or daycare. Sometimes we need a peacemaker ourselves—it can be taxing and draining to spend your day at work giving to others through your teaching, your research, your service, only to then come home and do it all again with a tired, hungry family, navigating the mountains of homework they often come home with.

In the end, I've come to realize there is no such thing as "balance" in my worlds. I'm a mathematician. I know what it means to be balanced. I balance equations. I balance my academic life on campus through my written work effort, but even that's a falsehood. My distribution of effort (how my university defines our workload/time each year up to 100%) has never been balanced. Work-life balance? Ha. How about this equation: *Work + Life = Real Life*.

Instead of working to achieve balance, I have negotiated and accepted work-life as harmony. Harmony ebbs and flows. Achieving harmony means two things vibrating together at frequencies in small ratios. Look at a graph of harmony. They are full of peaks and valleys. When in harmony, those peaks and valleys rise and fall together, and when they are not in harmony, they are all over the place. That, friends, is real life. Ideally, we want our work-life to be in harmony. Sometimes they won't be. Sometimes they will be. And when they're not, it's often for a short period or something needs to be tweaked.

I can't do it all. I can't do it all, all the time.

There simply is just not enough time to do it all. There just is not. I think this was probably the hardest thing for me to negotiate and accept. In my position in academia, I was offered many opportunities to do it all. I wanted to do it all. I thought I had to do it all. I thought I had to in order to be successful in my job. I thought I had to in order to achieve tenure and promotion. I would put in nine- to twelve-hour work days at the office (I teach night classes a lot) and then come home, cook dinner, and immediately start working again until about 11pm at night. I was not only physically exhausted, I was mentally exhausted. My personal life suffered. I was not physically healthy; I always had an excuse to not work out. While I was getting things done and was "productive", it was costing me much more.

We are in academia for a reason. We had some innate (or insane!) drive to pursue a doctorate or other advanced degree. It is naturally inside of us to constantly want to do more. To do our very best. To do better. To get it all done, all the time! But there came a point in time when I realized I just could not keep up.

I got glimpses of that offered position (i.e., doing it all, all the time) when I was pregnant with our first child. We had already experienced multiple miscarriages prior to this pregnancy, so we were cautiously optimistic about this pregnancy. Then my aunt lost her battle with cancer. While trying to keep up with my academic duties and caring for my extended family during the period of loss, my body screamed in protest, and I ended up in the hospital for five days. It just happened to be ten days after classes had started for the spring semester, and I was teaching a brand new course. When I came out of the hospital fog at the end of the five days, I had to negotiate a hard reality check. While I loved my fast-paced life, I could not keep it up. I could not keep trying to do it all. And in my negotiations and reflections on doing it all, I realized that I really was not doing it all well.

While my realization came virtually overnight through this lived experience, it took a while to negotiate and accept this new identity. I had to personally accept my identity as a person who could not do it all. I had to help society, especially my academic life (e.g., colleagues), understand I was not the “kind of person” who would do it all anymore.

Prioritize

While negotiating my multiple identities as a mathematics professor mom and re-negotiating my “I can do it all” hat, I had to decide what I wanted to do. While we cannot have it all, we CAN have what we want. So, I began to prioritize.

Before I became a mom, I was always on top of my work and got things turned in ahead of time or right on time. When I became a mom, well, that all fell apart! I certainly did not procrastinate on purpose, but I quickly realized that even with prioritizing, negotiating my identity as a mathematics professor mom meant wearing more hats than I realized. And my time was definitely no longer my own. Through some careful studying of planning tools, productivity articles, and podcasts coming from a working mom perspective, I was able to identify a system that worked for me. In fact, I now feel like I am more productive as a mathematics professor mom than I was before I was a mom.

In my prioritizing and reading about productivity, I came across a lot regarding multitasking and how it was not good. However, I do not think our academic lives, especially paired with motherhood, allow us the luxury of not multitasking. There are many times when I have prioritized my day and I go into work with a plan, only to have that plan blown in the first half hour by someone stopping by my office with some other priority or a student with a crisis.

Our time is constantly getting interrupted and we have that guilt...do we close the office door so we can get work done or do we keep it open to show we are welcoming and available? Personally, I have found that a combination of both helps me to keep my work-life harmony going. Setting aside chunks of time to work on a paper while leaving my office door a little cracked allows me time to concentrate on the paper, but always allows me to be available to my students and colleagues as their needs arise.

Turning off my Notifications.

By far the best thing I did for myself and my work-life harmony was turning off my notifications. It was probably the scariest thing I ever did, but in the end, it was the best thing. It has helped me feel more present at what I am doing. If I'm working, I work. I figured out that if daycare or school needs you, they will call you. My heart jumps when I see a 381 number (our local school) show up on my screen! If I'm cleaning, playing with my kids, or doing another activity in my mom identity, then I keep in that identity. If I get an emergency work call, then I'm honest about what I'm doing. "Is now a good time Margaret?" In reality I want to say—*No, it's 7:00pm and I'm trying to change the peed-on sheets on my son's bed while trying to convince him to get his PJs on, but please go ahead...* But instead I say—"Sure I can chat for a few minutes as long as you don't mind Carter in the background while I change sheets."

In trying to live in work-life harmony, I've realized things are going to bleed into each other. The best thing I can do is to be honest with myself and others about my limits and how much time I can give. For me, being honest keeps the conversation short and to the point.

Turning off notifications made a huge difference for me. But it was definitely hard. I used to pride myself in fast email responses and inbox zero for a very long time. But my home life was suffering. And my work was suffering. I was constantly being pulled away. I would be mid-conversation with my partner and would stop and answer an email. I would rush story time with our kids, so I could get back to emails after they went to bed. When I finally reflected on my practices and re-negotiated what was in front of me, I realized I was actually creating a more stressful environment for myself and my family instead of making things easier. I came to the realization that there will always be emails. Always. Do I achieve inbox zero anymore? Not usually. But that's ok to me. That's not a priority. My priority is to be present at home when I'm home.

Communication

In my own struggles with coming to terms with motherhood and being a professor, I really had to draw some strong boundaries for myself. I tend to be a workaholic. For example, it is very hard for me to sit down at night and watch TV without doing something else. I really had to train myself to come home and be present at home, but when I learned to do that well, I forgot about the communication part. I rarely come home and work (ironically I'm writing this at home while breaking every work rule I have...). So, if I do come home and work and I have not communicated the need to work in the evening or on the weekend, then it's fair game for my partner to call me out on it. If I have deadlines, I have learned to be realistic about it and communicate them.

There are many times when our multiple identities pull us in a thousand different directions. For example, this past fall, I was home making spaghetti. My (then) one-year-old had his arms wrapped around my legs crying for attention... while I was stirring the spaghetti noodles, trying to figure out if they were done... while I was on a work emergency phone call trying to calm down my frantic doctoral student who was having a moment of panic and self-doubt as her dissertation defense was the following week.

Through years of working toward harmony in my mathematics professor mother life, I have had to negotiate communicating with my partner. I have had to learn, time and time again, that communication is key.

My partner works full-time as a high school STEM teacher and part-time as co-director of our local soccer club. My position requires me to teach night classes, so we have to coordinate our schedules and our children's schedules. I sometimes take for granted that my partner can read my mind (he can't) and that he knows exactly what goes on during my work day each day (he doesn't). My partner and I have a general understanding that after the kids go to bed, we are going to either cuddle up on the couch and catch up on a show or work a puzzle together. This is just something we have found to help cultivate our relationship. If I want to use that time for something different or he wants it for soccer things, we have to be very clear about how much time we need and what it's for. For example, this past fall, I had a grant due at the beginning of the school year. It was a stressful time and I knew it would take extra time at night to get it all done. So I said, "Craig, I have a grant due on August 29. I'm going to need to spend some evening time working on this. I will probably need 1-2 hours each night this week to tend to last minute things that come in. I will need extra support during this time." Being specific about the task and time also helped keep me accountable. There were times I didn't want to work on it at night that week, but Craig was there encouraging me to just spend an hour.

Communicating with and Supporting Children

One thing I have consistently done since becoming a mathematics professor mom is to talk with my children about my job. I honestly don't remember why I felt so strongly about it or what led to it, but it has been something that I am passionate about. I talk to them about the work I do and why it's important. When they come to my office, I let them play with my mathematics manipulatives or 3D printer. I communicate with them about the perks of my job, like the flexibility to attend their school day activities, and also the realities of my job, such as having to work at night or on the weekends occasionally. If a work emergency interrupts my time with my children, I'm honest with them about it.

Children are usually very compassionate people and can teach us a lot about compassion and patience. That phone call from earlier? My six-year-old wanted to know if my student was OK and if we needed to do anything for her. Moments like that make me pause and reflect. My six-year-old recognized my student's needs, but did I? Did I give her what she needed?

Did I really listen to her? Was I hearing her concerns? Was I wearing too many hats at once when talking to her? I followed up the next morning with a positive, motivational email to reinforce the words I had told her on the phone, but were in a form that she could re-read.

Every child has special needs. Some are much more significant than others. Sometimes it requires an army of people to help meet the needs of our children. One of our perks in academia (usually) is our flexible schedules. But the flexible schedule can become complicated when a child needs extra services. One of my sons requires speech and occupational therapy. While it's convenient to have a set schedule each week, there are times when required meetings creep up. I then have to re-negotiate my priorities. Do I need to reschedule his services so I can be present at the meeting or can I miss or be late to the meeting? I used to be embarrassed that he needed services, and so I would often try to hide what I was doing during that time. I eventually realized that hiding it only caused me more stress, and it made it hard for me to be realistic and honest about my time. So now I say, "I can't be at the meeting at that time, but I'm happy to catch up with a colleague after the meeting and read the notes you send out. If there is an agenda item I can contribute to ahead of time, please let me know." Or, "I can't make the start of the meeting because my son has speech during that time. I'll be about fifteen minutes late to the meeting. Could you please hold my agenda item until I get there?" Or other times, I do need to reschedule one of his appointments. For me, it goes back to the prioritizing and harmony I strive for as a mathematics professor mom.

Life Happens

We all know "life happens" no matter what. Sometimes we can plan for it and sometimes it catches us by surprise. My most insane moment happened with the birth of our third child when my perfect harmony fell into perfect dissonance. In those moments of negotiating my identities as a mathematics professor mom, I had to make some quick choices about who was going to cover my classes; who was going to finish writing the grant narrative for which I was the lead; who was going to pick up the kids from school; etc. In the end everything turned out well and our son entered the world safely (albeit with the cord wrapped around his neck twice) just a couple of days early; and yes, I managed to get our grant turned in on time thanks to some really awesome colleagues and the fact that I had asked for help when I needed it.

Sometimes life happens and that harmony you've worked so hard for gets thrown into dissonance. Switching identities becomes wearing all my hats at the same time. For example, I know one of my children is probably going to be sick on the same day as the big dissertation defense of my student and my partner can't find a substitute for his class. I then have to play the game of "how sick are you"? Puking sick? Yuck. Video Conference it is. Feverish but not puking? They're coming with me to sit or sleep in the corner with a coloring book or a tablet or books. I used to feel guilty about doing this, but my daughter once told me that she didn't care, she just wanted to be with me. And she was right. I can sneak in and do the dissertation defense and then run her to the doctor and go home and cuddle her. I do usually have a back-up plan, but again, life happens and when it does, I have to chuck harmony out the window and do the best I can at the moment with what I have.

Conclusions

As Mathematics Professor Moms we wear multiple identities all day, every day. Sometimes we wear one hat at a time, and other times they are stacked on top of each other while we try not to fall over. In mathematics, we have theories, proofs, and messy, wicked problems that often lead to sound solutions. We like to think our lives can be that way as well, but life does not always conform. Research and social media tell us what it means to be a "good mom" or a "successful professor". But we know real life does not allow that. So as the movers and shakers in academia and the world of mathematics, we have to change the equation of what a "good mom" is. We have to cut ourselves some slack. Toys will be out. Dirty clothes on the floor, while annoying, is not the end of the world. Floors and toilets will always need cleaning. Laundry will never end. We often ask ourselves, is this normal? "Normal is just a cycle on the washing machine", my mom always says. My normal, or harmony, is not hiding the fact that I'm a Mathematics Professor Mom. Rather, I embrace the messiness of it all.

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