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My Best Laid Plan

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Synopsis

This story ties together the precise planning traits of mathematicians with the challenges of motherhood.

Let me introduce myself. I'm a Type A perfectionist who likes to be in control. As a kid, I would plan out my life with as much detail as possible including when I would get married and have kids, where I would live, and what I would do. You know, the usual. This hobby became a coping mechanism when I needed to navigate motherhood as a professor. Before continuing, let me also add that I am not a statistician, and yet even I know that my story is a strong outlier. Despite the fact that planning is the theme of this story, I fully admit that extremely good luck played an even larger role.

After graduating from Western Connecticut State University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Secondary Education in Mathematics, I began my short career as a high school math teacher at Newtown High School, in Sandy Hook, CT. While I worked, I continued part-time taking graduate courses at WCSU in the evenings to earn my M.A. in Mathematics. While teaching and taking classes, I met my husband. He was also a math teacher at NHS taking classes at WCSU for his Master's degree. After a year of dating secretly we got engaged. (Remind me to tell you about his romantic proposal some day.) After we got married, those planning skills went into full throttle. When would we have children? How would we manage daycare with both of us teaching high school and therefore having identical schedules? Would I stay at home? Could we afford that? Then, one day when talking with my Master's thesis advisor, he suggested I pursue a Ph.D. Me? Get a Ph.D.?

And yet, there was the answer. If I got my Ph.D., I could teach at the college level and enjoy the benefits of a flexible schedule that would allow me to stay home with my kids while still working full-time. This was it. This was the plan. I asked around. How long does it take to get a Ph.D. in Mathematics? Where would I do it? The only university that offered a Ph.D. program in mathematics that was close enough for my husband to keep working at NHS was Wesleyan University in Middletown, CT. I applied and was accepted! I was told it would take three to five years, full-time. OK. So, I would plan on four years. Let me acknowledge here that there was some serious luck playing a role here. I took this luck for granted at the time, but I now see that getting accepted to the only university that wouldn't require my husband to change jobs was statistically unlikely.

So, my husband and I moved to a town halfway between Sandy Hook and Middletown. Once I was deep enough into the program, I realized that the three to five years was basically a lie. There wasn't really anyone who did it in less than five years, and six years was more common than not. But, I had already committed to the program and the plan requiring this degree. I had quit my tenured teaching job and was already in the program.

Eventually I found an advisor who was willing to try to help me complete my degree in five years and I went to work. I cried a lot. This was really hard. I constantly felt like I wasn't good enough. I didn't know it had a name at the time, but I had a serious case of imposter syndrome. I was surrounded by confident, even cocky men who claimed they knew so much more than I did. It wasn't until a few years later that I realized that this is a common trait for men. They are good at "faking it until they make it" and they didn't really know more than me. So, if you too find yourself full of self-doubt and frustration, know that you aren't alone. This is what graduate school seems to be all about. At least it was for me.

Anyway, despite the daily tears and constant self-doubt, I continued. Earning a Ph.D. was the plan and I'm not one to give up on my plans. The plan included graduating in five years, and as I told my advisor, I wanted to move back to my hometown and get a job at WCSU (where I had earned my B.S. and M.A. degrees). My advisor wanted to be supportive, but he warned me that my plan wasn't the way jobs in academia worked. It was highly unlikely that a position would be posted the year I needed a job, and even if it was, they could be looking for any number of qualifications that I just didn't have.

At the time I didn't understand his concern. He obviously didn't understand that this was my plan, and I would just will it to happen exactly the way I wanted it to. But, I now realize, he was totally right. Getting a job at WCSU would be almost statistically impossible.

My fifth year of graduate school was finally happening and it looked likely that indeed I would graduate. I began looking for a job. With my husband already working in a job he loved, this became a "one-body" problem. I needed a job within a commutable distance from my husband's job. That basically narrowed it down to WCSU or a community college nearby. Amazingly, WCSU posted a tenure-track job seeking someone with a Ph.D. in mathematics with a preference for someone with a secondary teaching certification and experience who could supervise student teachers. As my advisor said when he read it, "did they have you in mind when they wrote this job description?" It was perfect. So as planned, and to the amazement of my advisor who still talks about it, I got the job. I got the perfect job at the perfect university. Now that I know how unlikely this outcome was, I still think back and marvel at how it all unfolded.

My plan was working. Those five years in graduate school were long and my maternal clock was ticking pretty loudly. And so the next part of the plan was to start a family. As any good planner would, I started to track my ovulating cycle. I took my resting temperature every morning at the same time and tracked several months over the summer before my first semester at WCSU. My husband and I moved to our hometown, and we waited for the semester to start. We planned to conceive in order to have a June baby, which would give me the whole summer home with our baby. One month prior to the month we wanted to get pregnant, we threw caution to the wind and surprisingly got pregnant.

Now I had an April 30 due date and a semester ending in early May. This was my first year at WCSU and the semester hadn't even started and I was pregnant. That wasn't exactly the plan, but I hoped the first pregnancy would go longer than 40 weeks and it would all work out. Why wouldn't it? Again, in hindsight I know this was, yet again, an almost impossibly lucky outcome. So many couples struggle for years to conceive and I was beyond fortunate to be within one month of my ideal due date.

That first semester of teaching was my first trimester of pregnancy. I hadn't planned on the morning sickness. And by morning sickness, I mean all day and all night sickness. It was bad. I was exhausted. I felt like a slacker who could barely keep up with the minimum requirements of the job. Surely this wasn't the first impression I wanted to make. I decided to confide in my very family-oriented department that I was pregnant. This would help them understand my behavior. Luckily, my department was nothing but supportive. Again, I acknowledge that this was very fortunate. I know many other women struggle in unsupportive departments.

Somehow I managed to get through that first year of teaching, and my daughter arrived ten days past her due date. She seemed to be helping with my plan since this delay meant I was able to give my final exams. And with the help of a friend, I graded the exams with a one-week old. Amazingly, my plan continued to work and I had almost eleven weeks home with my daughter before the next academic year began. Again, I realize that an uncomplicated pregnancy that yielded a full-term healthy baby is beyond lucky, but at the time I took this for granted.

Backtracking a little to the birth, let me tell you that the labor and delivery of my daughter was long and exhausting. By the time I delivered, it had been 36 hours of labor, 9 of which were really intense. Towards the end, some of my contractions came in pairs with no break between. But ultimately I delivered my daughter in a bathtub in a birthing center, which was pretty close to my birthing plan. What I didn't plan for was how exhausted I would be.

I started motherhood completely sleep-deprived from the labor and delivery. I was wiped out. Those first weeks with a newborn were miserable. I was beyond exhausted, and I was struggling to get my daughter to nurse. She was tongue-tied, and despite getting her tongue clipped twice (which was difficult on us both), we couldn't get her to latch. I was determined to breastfeed. It was the plan. As you know at this point in my story, I don't give up on my plans. I tried so hard to nurse my daughter. Ultimately, she began refusing my breast (literally turning her head away from me when I would offer it). This was emotionally devastating for me. After weeks of trying, concern over my daughter's lack of weight gain led me to give up on the possibility of her latching. Instead, I resigned myself with an alternate plan, and I began the exhausting ritual of being an exclusively pumping mother.

Prior to the start of that first semester after having my daughter (my second year of teaching), my husband and I sat down staring at a blank schedule template. I had selected my classes almost a year prior, while I was pregnant. They were to be Tuesdays and Thursdays during the day and Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday evenings. This plan (made while pregnant) seemed great on paper because it meant minimal babysitting needed. My husband could be home in the evenings. But, where would I find time for five weekly office hours and time to pump regularly? There were only fifteen minutes between my two Tuesday-Thursday afternoon classes. Since our daughter Summer was full-time nursing at this point, the only way to pump frequently enough meant pumping while driving in to work, pumping between classes and between class and office hours, and then again on the drive home. Needless to say, I got pretty good at pumping while driving. Luckily, they make hands-free pumping bras! So in the end I was able to make the plan work.

Pumping became like a part-time job. Did I say part-time job? It actually felt like a full-time job. Each pumping session was at least twenty minutes long, and I pumped every few hours during the day, and I would have to wake up once or twice during the night to pump. This was necessary to keep up my supply. It was exhausting. But I got through that semester, and surely it would get easier, right? After all, by the spring semester, my daughter would be eight months old and eating at least some solids. Right?

Well, as it turns out, no. My daughter wasn't interested in food until well after her first birthday. And so my second semester as a mother continued in a similar fashion as the first. Pumping between classes or while students waited outside my door for office hours became my norm. I'm quite sure as students sat there waiting, they wondered what that rhythmic humming sound was. I can't imagine they knew what a breast pump sounded like.

I was lucky to have my own private office to pump, but my pumping sessions weren't always so private. One day, the custodian started to unlock the door to my office so that he could empty my trash can. Luckily I heard him struggling with the key in time to detach the pump from my breasts and adjust my shirt. After that, I always put a "do not disturb" sign on my door.

Another time, I was pumping just before class with my door closed, as usual. I finished pumping just in time for class. I put the freshly pumped milk in my mini fridge, gathered my materials for class and made sure my shirt was

down and I was decent. When I went to open my door, it wouldn't open. It just wouldn't budge. I panicked. Luckily an adjunct professor was outside my office and heard me struggling with the door. He asked me if I needed help. Yes! The door was locked from the outside too. I slid my key to him under the door, but it didn't work! What was going on? Class would start soon. What now? I called the campus police. They arrived about 10 minutes later. At this point I was late for class. The adjunct professor announced to my class that I would be late and asked the class to wait. The police tried to unlock the door. Still no luck! I was really nervous now. How would I get out of my office? How long would it take? In fact, I'm still stuck in here as I write this. No. Just kidding, but it felt like forever. Since it was taking so long, I asked the adjunct professor to dismiss my students. Ultimately, a campus police officer climbed the scaffolding that happened to be outside my second story office window for construction. He passed me his night stick and a small screw driver through the window. I used these tools to take the hinges off my door and finally was free. So, why did I get stuck in my office? It turns out my door had a "privacy lock" feature I knew nothing about but had unknowingly hit when I closed the door to pump. Where was this feature when the custodian walked in on me?

Despite all the drama, I made it through my second year of teaching (first year of teaching as a mother). But, I didn't manage to make progress on research that would count towards tenure or promotion. With my first year as a mother under my belt, I began to give this task more of my effort. The next few years included a schedule of minimal day classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, followed by evening classes to minimize daycare needs. On my "free time" (and by free time I mean little moments here and there when I probably should have been sleeping) I managed to do some research. I published my dissertation, co-authored an article for NCTM's *Mathematics Teacher*, and did a few other projects. The work did pay off and I was promoted to Associate Professor after my fourth year.

While I managed to summarize these years in a neat little paragraph, let me acknowledge that I was exhausted for most of these years. The pressure I put on myself to stick with the plan I had made years before was intense. I didn't have a social life, or much in the way of down-time. When I talk to colleagues now about these years they talk about how distant I seemed.

Meanwhile, I continued to stubbornly stick to my plan, which included getting pregnant again. I would again plan to time the due date for another May or June baby, three years after my first. The pressure to make this work had me filled with anxiety, and caused me to gain fifteen pounds, and led to some conflict with my husband. But, ultimately it worked out pretty close. Our second daughter was born in late July, after I had just completed my fourth year at WCSU.

Since my first labor and delivery was so long and tiring, I vowed to be more rested for this second delivery. On the day she was born, I was feeling contractions, but I tried not to get too excited. I tried to rest and nap all day. In fact, all day I even wondered if I was experiencing real labor. I thought perhaps I was having Braxton-Hicks contractions. I figured I wouldn't have her until the next day. By 8 pm, with my three-year old daughter tucked into bed, I suddenly felt like my labor was progressing enough to go to the birthing center. The only problem was there was nobody nearby to stay home with my three-year old. Both my family and my husband's family were at least half an hour away. Even our neighbors weren't home. I didn't want to wake my daughter, and I still thought I had plenty of time before delivering, but at this point I knew the contractions were serious enough that I wouldn't be able to sit through a car ride to the birthing center. We knew we'd need an ambulance. We called an EMT. While my husband was on the phone, my water broke (all over my bed). By the time the ambulance arrived, I knew I was close to delivering. I wasn't going to make it to the ambulance. Minutes after the EMT arrived, I gave birth to my second daughter in my bed.

Luckily my second daughter took to nursing easily. In fact, she liked nursing so much that she refused to drink from a bottle. So, instead of a full-time pumper, I had to be around her frequently to nurse her.

Five weeks after having her, the fall semester started up, but I was lucky enough to have "banked" enough overloaded credits in the previous years that I could "cash them in" and only teach six credits. This amounted to a calculus course that I taught during the evenings and an afternoon class that met only once a week. My husband could be home every time I had to go to work. So, I was able to be home to nurse the baby on demand.

By the time the spring semester came around, my baby was about six months old but still not interested in solids or drinking from a bottle. But, I needed to teach a full course load again. Knowing I would need to be around to nurse

her, I scheduled my classes on Monday and Wednesday evenings and Tuesday and Thursday mornings and late afternoons. In between my morning and late afternoon classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, my husband would meet me in the parking lot with the baby. I would nurse her and then go back to teach my afternoon class. Despite this grueling schedule, I managed to complete some research (mostly due to “saving” some projects that I had started the year before when I was up for promotion) and I was awarded tenure after this fifth year. When I say I “managed,” it may not emphasize enough the pressure I put on myself to stick to my plan. I continued to lack a social life and was very anxious.

My sixth year of teaching continued in a similar way. During my seventh and eighth year of teaching, my younger daughter was finally in pre-school but I continued to keep a Monday, Wednesday, Friday teaching schedule. I stayed home with her on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and managed to grade and answer emails in stolen moments. This made for busy days, and I continued to lack a social life or enjoy much downtime.

Sticking to the plan was starting to really take its toll. A therapist asked me to think carefully about why I continued to stick to a plan I made before I knew what motherhood was like. Why was I killing myself by condensing a full-time job into a three-day week? Were the monetary savings in daycare worth the pressure and exhaustion? The obvious answer was no.

So in my ninth year of teaching I sent my youngest daughter to pre-school five days a week, which gave me a five-day work week again. This was quality-of-life-changing. It allowed me to begin to rekindle friendships and have a little bit of a social life. It also allowed me to devote more time to service to my university and department and to work on other projects that I hope will lead to a promotion to full professor. At least, that is the plan. But if I’ve learned nothing else from this experience, it is that a plan is nice, but it shouldn’t be followed at all costs.