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From Ecstasy to Agony and Back: Mathematics, Motherhood, and Postpartum Depression¹

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Synopsis

In this essay I address some challenges I had to overcome as a non-tenured mathematician mother married to another mathematician. While some of these challenges, such as lack of sleep, were predictable, many were not. For example, I was not aware that just getting pregnant would be a difficulty. Also, I did not know how paralyzing postpartum depression could be. Looking back on these experiences after a few years, I have a new perspective. I share my experiences, feelings about them, and some of the ways I figured out to overcome the hardships I experienced.

Keywords: *mathematics, motherhood, postpartum depression*

1. The Beginning

I grew up in a traditional family, in a traditional culture, where women were second-class citizens. I was supposed to get married at an early age, have a few children, and have the biggest part of my identity be serving my family as a wife and mother. Well, this path was just not for me. I immigrated to the United States as a religious refugee (I am from Iran and I am Jewish), when I was nineteen. Soon enough I discovered my love for mathematics and decided I wanted to learn and teach it for the rest of my life.

¹ To Evan, who has made me a better person and my world more beautiful.

So I needed to get my Ph.D. I met my husband in graduate school and we graduated in the same year. We were lucky enough to solve our two-body problem within a year in a location we like, even though it is far away from both our families. When we started our positions we were both on the tenure track and making a good income. Math had saved me from a life that would have made me miserable, and had brought me the opportunity to live my dream.

We decided to start a family. We wanted to have two children and I was in my mid-thirties. Assuming that there would be no problems, we planned to get pregnant at the beginning of the academic year so the baby would be born near or during the summer break. It turned out that getting pregnant was not as easy as one might think, at least not for us.

To make a long story short, it took us two years, visiting two infertility clinics, one surgery, and some fertility treatments to get pregnant. The baby was due in February. We did not care that we would not have a spring baby at this point. We were extremely happy.

2. It's a Boy!

I was induced on my due date and after eight hours of labor, I had a C-section. Our healthy and beautiful son was born. We were over the moon. Because of my complicated relationship with my family, I had asked my parents not to visit for a while. So it was just the three of us when we got home.

I had heard many horror stories about the pain and discomfort that follows a C-section, but I was doing remarkably well. I could move around easily without much pain and I felt happier than ever. I felt that I was in paradise for the first week. The only problem was that I did not have much success breastfeeding and I did not produce much milk. I could only pump enough milk to feed him twice a day. After consulting with three lactation consultants, I had made my peace with this.

When our son was eight days old, he became lethargic and we could not wake him up. We called the pediatrician's office, and the nurse on call told us to take him to the emergency room immediately. I would not feel happiness for almost two years after that day, although I did not know this at the time.

3. I Moved From Heaven to Hell

When we got to the children's hospital I crashed, both physically and emotionally. They needed to get me a wheelchair because I could not walk from the entrance to the NICU (Neonatal Intensive Care Unit). While my husband was crying, I was completely numb, staring into space and preparing myself for my precious son's death. This actually became a source of friction between us later, as my husband could not understand why I was dealing with the pain so differently. I did not want to talk and I did not shed a single tear. Did I not love my son? Later I learned through therapy that some people react to extreme distress the way I did: by being in complete shock and numbness. When my mother found out what was going on she blamed me for not taking good care of my son (she still criticizes my parenting on a regular basis). The doctors thought the medication I was prescribed to reduce the pain from my C-section could be the reason for my son's condition. So not only I was inadequate in feeding my child, but what I was able to provide for him was poisoning him. Basically, I was getting the message from various sources that I was to blame. And I believed it.

It turned out that he had a cold virus and we took him home after five days. However, this time when we got home, not only was I not happy and energetic like the first week, but I was tired all the time and I felt a very deep sadness. It felt like I was stuck under a heavy, smelly, and scratchy blanket, and no matter what I did, I could not get my head out to breathe.

4. My Illness Went Undetected and Untreated

I learned two interesting facts during this period. The first was that postpartum depression is the most common complication of childbirth. The second was that both the OB-GYN and the pediatrician give every new mother a short questionnaire to determine whether she suffers from it. For me, these appointments happened during my son's stay at the NICU or shortly after he got out. Even though my evaluation results put me in the depressed zone, the doctors assumed it was due to sadness caused by the extraordinary situation, and that it was temporary.

My memories of the following six weeks are quite foggy. All I remember is always being exhausted, not getting any joy out of caring for my son, and a lot of crying. I had arranged for an eight-week maternity leave,

but I desperately wanted to go back to work. During those weeks I had to visit my dentist to get a root canal. As I was driving to my appointment, I felt I was driving to a resort. What was wrong with me? I had wanted a baby so desperately and had gone through a lot to have one. Was I not supposed to be happy and filled with joy? Had I made a mistake? Was motherhood not for me? Would he be better off without me in his life? I concluded that I was not meant to be a mother, and that I was a terrible one to my child. Not surprisingly, this added to my misery and I started crying more.

5. I Went Back to Work

Even though it seemed like it would never end, my maternity leave ended and I got to go back to work. This made me feel better, because I was way more comfortable in my role as a faculty member than I was as a mother. This was an environment where I repeatedly got positive feedback. Once again, math was saving me.

Going back to work opened a new can of worms. I would hear (or read) from stay-at-home moms that they felt very fortunate that they did not have to go to work. I also heard from some working mothers that they wished they could afford to stay home with their young children. I read in psychology articles how important it was for children's emotional health to have a single care-giver (of course the mother) for the first two years. All of this added to my level of guilt. I even felt bad because I enjoyed going to work.

I should mention here that my husband and I took care of our son full-time for the first two years by arranging our teaching during complementary days and times. We were working full-time at demanding jobs, we were untenured, we did not have help from our families, and we did not hire a nanny. During his second year, we hired babysitters for about three hours a week because we were working on a research project together. Needless to say, these conditions put a lot of pressure on our marriage. My husband had been my best friend for years, and at this point, as we moved from being partners to being only co-parents, I felt more and more isolated. The only adults I felt connected to were my students, and the only place I felt confident was work. I felt useless and worthless at home, both as a mother and as a wife.

Eventually, the depression and lack of sleep began affecting my brain and my mathematical abilities. I made many mistakes while teaching. It was difficult to think at a high level to conduct any research. My ability to do mathematics, which had saved me from many undesired situations was slipping away. I felt that I was good for nothing.

6. I'm Diagnosed With Postpartum Depression—Now What?

A few months after I gave birth, I needed to see my family doctor for an unrelated reason. Within the first five minutes of our visit she told me that I had postpartum depression and the sooner I got on medication the better. Since I had a history with the disease (I took anti-depressants for six months in graduate school, but that is a different story), she did what made the most sense: she prescribed me the same medication that had worked well for me before.

The first time I had experienced clinical depression, I had a healthy point of view about it: it was a disease caused by chemical imbalance and I needed some help from the outside to become the real me again. However, it was different this time. I did not feel that I was ill; I felt that I was a bad person. I was also experiencing an identity crisis. The first time I had experienced clinical depression, I knew exactly who I was: a female graduate student studying mathematics, who had developed test anxiety, and needed to pass qualifying exams. This time I did not even know who I was. If I stayed at school for a minute longer than I had to to answer a student's question or talk to a colleague, I would feel guilty towards my husband and son. If I made mistakes during lecture, or could not answer students' questions because of lack of sleep, I felt guilty towards my students. Since I needed a particular teaching schedule to be able to coordinate with my husband's schedule, I felt guilty towards my colleagues and department chair. At the time, I was serving on the Promotion and Tenure Committee and because of my restricted schedule the committee had to meet on Fridays at 4:15 pm. This added a new group of colleagues I assumed hated me. Which role was my primary role? I was lost and confused.

Nonetheless, I took the medication as directed. It made it difficult to wake up in the middle of the night to feed my son. My doctor changed the medication. I got too drowsy in the morning to drive to work. She changed it again.

I could not sleep for forty eight hours and my hands started shaking uncontrollably. She switched me to a different one. I did not experience severe side effects. So I kept taking this medication for about nine months.

The sadness stayed, but I noticed I could not cry anymore. I did not even enjoy my work anymore. My view of myself did not change; I was a terrible mother and I knew it. However, I learned to pretend. I would go to the bathroom, look in the mirror, literally put on a face that did not show how I felt, and would go back to the room to spend time with my son. In fact, I got so good at pretending that even my husband could not tell I was suffering. This went on till June, when my son was sixteen months old.

7. My Savior Showed up

We have a good friend from graduate school who got a position at a school a few hours away from us. We are fortunate that she has a commitment in our city every June, so we get to see her and spend some quality time with her at least once a year for a few days. When she visited in 2015, after a couple of days she asked me, “so, how are you doing?” I said I was fine and asked why she asked. She said that she thought there was something off about my behavior, that it seemed I was two different people depending on whether or not my son was present. I told her that I felt sad and tired and defeated all the time, and that I tried very hard to act happy when I was around my son. She told me she did not think my depression was under control. When I told her I was too tired to do anything about it, she convinced my husband that I was sick and that they needed to help me. The two of them did research online and found a therapist they thought would be able to get through to me. This gave me new hope that I did not have to live a miserable life forever.

8. I Saw the Light at the End of the Tunnel

I made an appointment with the therapist. My husband and my friend were right; she was great. She gave me homework: material to read and questions to answer about my identity. She helped me eliminate or change some of my dysfunctional relationships. She also recommended a good psychiatrist. Even though I had to try a few other medications, this psychiatrist finally found a combination that worked well. Once I started therapy and the medication that was right for me, the recovery started. I could feel that for a few hours

a day I could get out of the heavy, smelly, and scratchy blanket. I was truly enjoying my son. After a few months I actually felt happiness for the first time in a few years. Little by little I (almost) got my old brain back. Once again I felt like a successful and capable professor. Also, I was able to see that I was already a good mother and I learned ways to become a better one. After all, as a trained mathematician, I have learned skills to read and research and learn new things all the time.

9. The Good Things

This essay paints a dark picture up to this point. However, there were some positive aspects to my experience.

- I have always been a shy, introverted, and reserved person. However, being tired and emotionally vulnerable for an extended period of time helped me open up in ways I never had before. This got me closer to my colleagues, turned some colleagues to friends, and made me more relatable to my students. I no longer seemed like a well-organized workaholic who rarely made mistakes.
- I was trained as a low-dimensional topologist and I work at a liberal arts college. When I felt that my brain could not handle high-level mathematics anymore, I was forced to change my research area so that I could remain an active scholar. This allowed me to involve my (undergraduate) students in research, which I enjoy a great deal.
- Being a teacher has given me some insights about how to be a good mother. Respecting my son and listening to him are skills I practice as a teacher all the time.² Being a scholar has helped me realize there are scholars doing research on parenting. This might seem obvious to some, but I know for a fact that not all parents have this approach. I searched for answers in books and articles and found some good information and good advice.

² EDITOR'S NOTE: Several articles in this issue explore commonalities between parenting and teaching; see in particular the contributions of Aliza Steurer and Ksenija Simic-Muller.

- Becoming a mother has made me kinder and more compassionate towards my students. If I wonder how to address a difficult issue, I think of what I would want if I were the student's mother.
- I have learned to have balance in my life. And to accept that I do not need to work fifty hours a week on a regular basis, hold review sessions on weekends, grade every exam within two days, and have my office door open all the time. I also do not need to say "yes" every time I am asked to serve my profession or I am asked to get involved in a research project. Being a graduate student trains one to do work or think about work at almost all waking (and sometimes sleeping) hours. But, for most people, work is only part of life and not all of it. I did not learn to make this transition until I became a parent.
- I have realized that I have the brain power and the discipline to get my life back. I also have people in my life to give me support of various kinds. I had the attitude that I was strong and independent, and that I needed no help. It was empowering to learn that it is okay to need help.

10. Some Final Thoughts

Given my history, I do not feel qualified to give anyone any advice. However, these are some points to think about.

- Getting a Ph.D. in mathematics is so difficult that one might feel that if they can accomplish that, then they can do almost anything. This is not true, as different people have different skills. For example, we do learn patience and perseverance as scholars and teachers, but compassion is not a part of our training. Also, as mathematicians, logic and deductive reasoning drive our work; but this approach does not necessarily help while raising a child. (As we all know at some level, little people are completely driven by their emotions.)
- Women receive the message that being a mother is in their instincts, but this is also not true for everyone. Some of us need to learn the skills that make one a good mother. If being a mother does not seem like the most natural thing to you, it does not mean there is anything wrong with you.

It seems to me that parenting is very much like learning to play a musical instrument. Some are more gifted than others. Nevertheless, everyone needs to practice and work hard to become a good parent.

- We can play many roles and do all of them well. Being a mother and a professional woman is possible. It is okay to love your career; it does not mean you love your children any less than you would if you were a stay-at-home mom. The key is to accept that for some periods we may be better in one than the other, and that these periods alternate.
- Once you have a baby, the nature of your relationship with your significant other will change. You will need to reconfigure your marriage in a way that includes being parents.
- Depression is a medical condition. And the depressed person is usually not able to evaluate the situation accurately. So it is important to be open with people you love and trust and take their advice.

Once my illness was treated and I learned the basics of parenting, my life became what I always wanted. At this time I consider myself one of the most fortunate people I know, as almost all my dreams have come true. I love my job and where I live, my marriage is successful and can handle difficulties, and I have a son who is happy and healthy, whom I love to the moon and back! I could not have asked for a better life.