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Beautiful Madness: Math and Motherhood — Can You Have It All?¹

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Synopsis

I am a tenure-track assistant professor, and I have a beautiful three-year old boy and a husband who I love. My life today is within epsilon of the future I imagined while I was in university and contemplating a career in mathematics. Getting here, however, took longer than I thought. Along the way I often felt I was under pressure to choose between my career and having a family. I never made this choice and, although my pregnancy and my son did interfere with my career, I would not have it any other way. This is the story of how I got it all.

Do I have a choice?

I grew up moving back and forth between Venezuela and Canada due to my parents' divorce. In Canada I got my first glimpses at academic life and motherhood from watching my single mother struggle to complete her master's degree in psychology. My mother struggled with depression and this led to me spending more time with my family in Venezuela. In Venezuela there was a strong family expectation that I find a man to take care of me in order to raise a family, and there I began to associate having a family with a life of dependence. I wanted to get away from these expectations and my abusive father, and so my older sister saved my life by demanding that my mother confront her depression, get a job, and take me back to Canada.

¹I would like to thank Michael Hickey and his son Nathan for their support and constructive criticism of the manuscript.

For many years to come, I struggled emotionally, torn between the expectation to marry and have children that I inherited from my family, and the expectation I adopted from my community in Canada, which was to get a job to survive. Also, as you can imagine, with all this happening during my formative years of middle and high school, I was not shaping up to be a stellar student.

While I had always enjoyed mathematics, it wasn't until my final year of high school that I decided to make it my career. My math teacher, Mr. Moss, saw my potential as a mathematician and, despite my poor academic record and bad attitude, set very high expectations for me. He spent his lunch hour tutoring me to earn the grades I needed for admission to Simon Fraser University. With his help, I graduated from high school confident that I could set my own expectations for my future and that, through hard work, I could achieve them. Mr. Moss served as a role model in one other important way as well: he was happily married and raising a family.

My mathematical career began to take form once I was living on my own in Vancouver and studying at SFU. I excelled in mathematics and decided to continue my studies at the University of British Columbia in a master's degree program. After completing my degree at UBC, I was accepted by the University of Oxford for a PhD in Numerical Analysis and, during my third year there, I began dating a fellow mathematician who would later become my husband and father of my children. At the time though, both of us were enjoying our academic successes and treating other pursuits as secondary. I don't think that starting a family was on either of our radars, and I didn't yet believe that I could find a balance between my mathematics career and a family. With the benefit of hindsight, I see now that I needed time to mature in order to find this balance.

The silly things people say

While I was at a conference in Scotland, I stumbled upon my Ph.D. external examiner and he cordially asked me, "What are you going to do with your life?" to which I explained, "I want to publish, become an excellent teacher, and have a family," at which he laughed along with his colleague. He said, "You can't have it all. You will have to choose, just like we had to." I had the momentary strength to point out that we were there to celebrate a notable professor for his excellence in research, teaching, and strong family values.

To which he replied, “Yes, but he is special.” I suppose I had somehow begun to believe I could have it all, but at that moment my earlier beliefs, that I had to make a choice, were reinforced. If you are a mathematician reading this, this sort of dialogue will not be new to you. This is just one of many diverging series of commentaries relating to motherhood and mathematics.

At this point I could continue on with hundreds of mathematician commentaries encouraging people to choose between mathematics and having a family. Instead I’ll continue to explain how you can have it all. For some of us, it may mean that we don’t have it all at the same time. But, if you want to be a mother and you want to do mathematical research and/or teaching, then you can certainly find your own way to do it.

A traveling mathematician

My decision after my Ph.D., at the age of 29, was to travel with my career until I met the person I was going to have a family with. I decided that when that time came, I would be open to settling down, but for the time being I wanted to focus on research and teaching mathematics. I kept a strong social life in all the countries I lived in, with the idea that this would be necessary in order to be able to maintain a healthy relationship when it came along. I also enjoyed the intercultural diversity I was exposed to as a traveling mathematician.

After graduation, I took my first mathematics postdoctoral position in Frankfurt, Germany. I then accepted a fellowship at the TECHNION in Israel. Following that, I worked as a mathematician at a wave energy company in Vancouver, Canada, and directly after I worked in computational mathematics related to HIV research at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, USA. While in Seattle, I really missed teaching, so I balanced my research position with teaching a course on Scientific Computing at the University of Washington. Later on, I spent two years at Durham University in the UK focusing on teaching and research. Following that I spent a few years dedicated to only research, with one year at the Basque Center for Applied Mathematics in Spain, and over a year at the Max Planck Institute for Plasma Physics in Germany.

The clock started ticking when I accepted a tenure-track position

While I was at the Max Planck institute, I decided to settle down at the age of 38, and I accepted a tenure-track position at Manchester Metropolitan University in the UK. This was a place where I felt my research interests aligned perfectly with many faculty in the mathematics department, and where I could see myself for the long run. At the time, I was also prepared to have a child on my own. That is, I thought I was prepared, without truly understanding what it meant to have a child. Without going into much detail here, the space my brain was in can only be described through the metaphor of a ticking clock. I wanted to have a baby and that was that.

My ex-boyfriend from my Ph.D. days happened to come back into my life, even though he was living in Seattle. He offered to move to Manchester with me, so we could marry and have a baby there. After calculating my salary with him not working in the UK vs. having a child with his salary in Seattle, I concluded it was best to give up the tenure-track position. We got married over the weekend, and I moved to Seattle a few weeks later, with the plan that I would get pregnant and get a job in a coffee shop.

Keeping a job while pregnant

A couple of weeks into my new life in Seattle, I was pregnant and missing mathematics. I applied for adjunct teaching positions at a few colleges in Seattle with a zero-response rate. I persistently emailed and called the dean at a college close to my house, and eventually left a voicemail, explaining I'd have to get a job as a Data Scientist, though what I really wanted was to teach as an adjunct faculty at his college. He eventually brought me in and offered me a course to teach, and from then on, I taught one or two classes per quarter as adjunct faculty.

I wanted to continue teaching until I gave birth, but when I tried to get a teaching assignment during my due date quarter, the request was denied. The dean said that it would be too complicated to find someone to replace me at the end of the quarter, and so he could not offer me any teaching. I accepted that at the time, but since then I learned that I have rights under the Pregnancy Discrimination Act (PDA), and I could probably have avoided being rejected for the adjunct teaching assignment.

Luckily, I returned to teaching night classes as adjunct faculty two months after giving birth, which allowed me to enjoy teaching mathematics while at the same time being a daytime stay-at-home mom.

Interviewing while breastfeeding

Once I was into night teaching, I interviewed for a tenure-track position at a small university close to Seattle. On the first day I found out that there was a mistake with the schedule. My interview with the only applied mathematician on the faculty was scheduled at “10:30-10:25am”. My first breast pumping break was scheduled “10:30am to 11am”. I had to use the breast pump since I was feeding-on-demand. Not pumping for seven hours until the next breast pumping break would result in pain, not to mention a mess. That day, I pointed out the mistake to the chair of the committee, but it was ignored. When I met the professor for my negative five-minute interview, she said we had an hour. I explained I wouldn’t be able to stay the full hour because I had been double-booked in that time slot to pump. She disregarded what I said and explained that she wanted me to sit with her and write the outline for an introductory numerical analysis course. I was stunned by disbelief.

The applied mathematician was not pleasant that day, nor the next. At lunch she would not even make eye contact with me. I brought up that we didn’t have a chance to talk about research the day prior, and that I would like to if she would. She flippantly said, “No, it’s ok, it’s not so important. There will be time,” but I knew there would be no more time.

It seemed that if I really wanted the job, then I needed to put employment first and my mothering needs second, at least until the end of the interview. However, I wanted a job where I felt comfortable and where my colleagues would understand the necessity of breast pumping. I decided to just be myself and to continue to be myself until I could find an opportunity compatible with my needs as a mother.

Within epsilon of the future I imagined

I am now a tenure-track mathematics professor at South Seattle College, a two-year college. Typically, I leave home at 6am, go to the gym, and arrive at work between 8am and 9am, depending on my class times.

I work for seven hours at the college, then another hour or two at home before picking up my son from daycare. Luckily, my husband has been able to drop off our son in the mornings, which gives each of us a couple of hours with our son every day, in addition to family dinnertime.

While this essay was under review, I became pregnant with my second child. We had been trying for eight months, which included a miscarriage at three months. I am currently in the sixth quarter of a nine-quarter tenure process, and I informed my tenure committee of my pregnancy at 18 weeks. I am fortunate that my institution has a contract that includes baby bonding time in addition to the state maternity leave laws. That is, I have the option to take unpaid maternity leave for up to a year if I would like to. However, I will not make any progress towards tenure during my maternity time off. The seventh quarter is when my tenure committee makes their last vote in order to recommend me or not (summer does not count toward tenure). Because my expected due date is two weeks prior to my seventh quarter, it was a struggle for me to decide whether I should immediately return to work or take maternity leave and postpone tenure.

Thankfully, I have received a lot of support from my colleagues, which includes my department coordinator making me aware that I can teach full-time online if I don't want to postpone tenure. My dean was also very supportive and put me in touch with human resources in order to make me aware of my options, including taking maternity leave for baby bonding if I wished.

I am currently twenty-six weeks pregnant and have upgraded my self-care to include prenatal massages every other week. I have also recently arranged to have weekly dates with my husband, which has helped my peace of mind by creating space to communicate during the quiet time away from my active three-year old. Right now, I'm very happy teaching mathematics, which includes teaching differential equations in an inquiry-oriented way. I am also very happy being a mother to my son, enjoying his company on week nights and having weekends all together as a family. For the time being I have decided to take maternity leave in the fall and postpone my tenure by one quarter, and I will finish my sixth quarter next week and then take the summer off from teaching. To keep my mind busy over the summer, I may take on some mathematics research contract work, which is something I have done in the past in between academic positions.

Having strong organization skills has been an advantage for me to balance mathematics and motherhood. However, as an academic mother I learned quickly that I can't plan for everything, such as financial hardships, lice, miscarriages, and sacrificing some weekends to work. In order to accommodate for these adventures, I find it important to stay as healthy as possible; otherwise I would need even more time for doctor visits. So organizing healthy food, exercise, and finding time for self-care have been integral to keeping a balance. I have a wonderful little boy, a healthy relationship with my husband, and a career in mathematics spanning quality research and diverse teaching experiences.

Just not all at the exact same time.