

## Arrival At the Same Point: My Long, Winding, and Not-So-Circular Path to Professor

Melissa B. Hanzsek-Brill  
*St. Cloud State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm>

 Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Mathematics Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Hanzsek-Brill, M. B. "Arrival At the Same Point: My Long, Winding, and Not-So-Circular Path to Professor," *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics*, Volume 8 Issue 2 (July 2018), pages 246-253. DOI: 10.5642/jhummath.201802.27 . Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/vol8/iss2/27>

©2018 by the authors. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons License.

JHM is an open access bi-annual journal sponsored by the Claremont Center for the Mathematical

Sciences and published by the Claremont Colleges Library | ISSN 2159-8118 | <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/jhm/>

# Arrival At the Same Point: My Long, Winding, and Not-So-Circular Path to Professor

Melissa B. Hanzsek-Brill

*Department of Mathematics & Statistics, St. Cloud State University, Minnesota, USA*  
mbhanzsek@stcloudstate.edu

---

## Synopsis

This is my story of the constant struggle between wanting both mathematics and motherhood, and realizing I could have it all but not all at once. The story involves earning degrees, securing a tenure-track position only to resign two years later, and then, through a gauntlet of adjunct and fixed-term positions, applying for and accepting another tenure-track position at the same institution; finally arriving back at the same point on the path I had been on sixteen years earlier. I walked this long, winding, and ultimately no-so-circular path while becoming and being a mother of four. It is my hope that this story inspires other mathematicians and mothers to carve their own path, and to know it does not have to look like the path most others have walked; it just has to work for them.

---

I sit in my office listening to the muffled voices on the other side of the wall. Anticipation begins to build inside me just like the four times before I gave birth to one of my children; there is no way out except to move forward with this moment if I am to succeed. But knowing this doesn't make me stop wishing there was another, easier path, perhaps one less awkward and painful. The children were the first career I knew I always wanted to have, and wouldn't be complete without. Now, as I wait for my phone to ring, I close my eyes and think about the other career I knew was just as much a part of who I was and had always wanted: mathematics.

I am a mathematics educator and a mother. For most of my life these two careers were how I envisioned my life unfolding. I could not see a future for myself that didn't include both. I began both careers thinking they could only exist in separate spheres, and each would have a clearly-defined, linear path to success. I did not know the depths of my own misconceptions.

A color-coded calendar with a well-organized to-do list defined my graduate school years. I was confident that if I planned well, I would accomplish everything I wished in my academic career on a clear timeline that mirrored every other academic I encountered. Point A to point B: five years to complete a Ph.D. Point B to point C: five years to apply for and receive tenure with promotion to associate professor. Point C to point D: five more years to apply for and receive promotion to full professor. The lines between these points had well-defined rules and expectations. I understood the expectations and embraced the milestones I needed to meet.

Today I have arrived at point D, fully promoted and tenured. But along the way I had to alter my path multiple times and in multiple ways to achieve my goals. Success as both a mother and mathematics educator was possible, but achieving success required more imagination and course corrections than I dreamed when I was at point A. It is my hope that by telling my story, other mathematician mothers can see there are a multitude of paths to and definitions of success as long as you are willing to change your mindset.

In the movie *Groundhog Day*, Phil Connors awakens to the same day over and over again. At first he is resentful and confused but over time finds a goal for his trapped life: self-improvement by educating himself on a daily basis. The spiraling path he follows finally ends, and Phil emerges a changed man on a different trajectory. This story is an allegory for my academic life of mathematics and motherhood.

My academic story begins on a linear path to completing my Ph.D. in five years. As I entered my final year of coursework and began studying for my comprehensive exams I noticed that I struggled to stay awake. I thought I was just exhausted, burning the candle at both ends trying to meet the five-year deadline I had set to earning my Ph.D. But this was more than the usual grad school exhaustion; I was pregnant. This was not in my plan. However, since my husband and I had been discussing the idea of having children in the near future once our degrees were completed, we quickly adjusted, I minimally recalibrated my calendar, and I became a mother.

Nothing could have prepared me for how completely this new human would take over my life and my heart. I spent many hours agonizing over not being home with my baby. I was torn between my academic life and my life as a new mother. Still, with a partner also in graduate school, the fact that graduate school allows for some flexibility, and a very carefully organized schedule,

I was able to return to teaching and classes a week after my daughter was born. I actually didn't have a choice about returning seven days after giving birth; my professors just expected I would be there and were not pleased I had to miss the few days I did while recovering. I also chose to exclusively breastfeed and had to maneuver around a male faculty member who argued I couldn't possibly maintain my teaching assistantship while doing so. I had to maintain my graduate school life as if I had not just given birth. It was expected.

I adjusted to this reality and began the process of building a wall between my two worlds. In order to finish my degree in the five-year window I had pre-established, and needing to secure employment to successfully arrive at point B, I couldn't reject any experience offered to me while completing the degree. It was important to me that my daughter minimally realize I was not around. In order to maximize my time with her and the opportunities offered to me professionally, I scheduled my life around the times she slept, leaving after putting her down and returning about the time she would awaken. I worked on my dissertation at night after she fell asleep, sleeping barely four to five hours a day myself. There was no room for error on either path. The result was that, while exhausted, I finished in five years and accepted a tenure-track position. Point A to point B accomplished.

Much like Phil Connors, I was stubbornly sticking to the linear path I was familiar with and felt sure was the "correct" one for an academic, not allowing for other realities to cloud my judgement. I was an academic, a mathematician, an educator, and there was no room for error in my career. I was also a mother, fiercely trying to provide my daughter with quality time and meet all the expectations I had set for myself in that role. Each role had become a separate track as I moved from point A to point B; I kept one foot on each and did not allow them to intersect. In my mind they needed to be disconnected to ensure my success. It was in keeping with what I had seen from other female academics and the message I had been given from academic life. Everything could and should continue as expected; I did not make room for alternative plans.

My first year at St. Cloud State University was pretty typical. I spent time trying to learn the culture of the institution, set up plans for the course rotation I would be on, and established a professional presence both locally and nationally with multiple conference presentations, grant writing,

and service work. My husband stayed home with our daughter and spent time diligently writing his dissertation. I continued to keep mathematics and motherhood disjoint. I settled into a workable routine and contentedly moved down a linear path toward point C, my five-year tenure and promotion deadline.

With my daughter now age two-and-a-half, and my academic career on track, it seemed time to add to our family. I was thrilled to discover at the start of my second year that I was pregnant and found that while I was tired I could easily maintain my daily schedule. With no paid family leave available, the timing was near perfect; my son was due at the start of May, just as the year was winding down. I could have an entire summer with my toddler and newborn, and not lose too much time on my tenure clock.

Then life intervened. My paths were about to diverge, merge, and never resemble anything linear ever again. At the start of spring semester we discovered via ultrasound that my son would need extra care and multiple surgeries in his first few years. I decided to take a year of unpaid leave and request that my tenure clock be stopped during that time, which was approved after a long paperwork process. My husband made the decision to not pursue an academic career and began working full-time in the private sector to support us.

Four surgeries later it was clear that we needed me home for another year. So again I requested a year of unpaid leave and an additional year stopped on my tenure clock. Doing this was risky, but I knew my son needed me. At that point, an interesting change had happened inside of me. I realized how much being a mother completely immersed in her children's lives meant to me. I always knew I wanted to be a parent, but I did not understand that I had a strong desire to be at home and that I would be willing to forgo mathematics and teaching for that opportunity.

Three months later when I found out I was pregnant with my third child, I resigned the tenure-track position I had worked so hard for. My newfound definition of motherhood and love for my small children outweighed my love of academics and mathematics. I saw no way to maintain full-time academic status, pursue tenure, and fulfill my role as mom without sacrificing my expectations. I had no other model to follow. My colleagues with children were academic men with wives who stayed at home to care for their children,

academic women without children, academic women who had raised children and then pursued their Ph.D., or academic women who had postponed motherhood until after securing tenure. Placing my children in daycare was an option, but even if I had wanted to do this, it wasn't affordable with three children on an academic salary. In short, the possibilities before me were limited if I wanted success in both arenas. Finding myself at this unexpected point, I embodied the theory of optimal stopping, choosing to take a particular action in order to maximize an expected reward or minimize an expected cost.

Parenting during these years introduced me to my most profound training as a mathematician and mathematics educator. I became both a teacher and a learner, and discovered these roles are not mutually exclusive. In fact, I needed to be both at the same time in order to be effective. I learned there is no such thing as mastery, as I rediscovered the wonder of mathematics through my children's eyes. Concepts I had considered basic and trivial were now complex and wondrous. I learned to understand and explain ideas based on my children's discoveries, declarations, and questions, none of which were exactly the same between the three of them. Most importantly I found there was lots of room for error; there was joy, forgiveness, discovery, and fulfillment in error.

A year after the birth of my third child I realized a piece of how I defined myself was missing; I missed mathematics and teaching. When the call came asking if I was interested in teaching a few courses as an adjunct, I jumped at the opportunity. Teaching up to nine credits per year as an adjunct without the pressure of tenure was ideal and fulfilled a need inside of me I had thought I'd lost.

I began teaching mathematics with a new perspective and fulfillment, and that reflected back into my parenting. My two distinct spheres were colliding, the walls between them were breaking down. I took risks with teaching I would have never considered prior to motherhood — I took over courses mid-semester when instructors left or graduate students needed teaching guidance. I learned to teach online. I embraced more active-learning over lecture. I flipped classrooms. I knew that it was possible that I could fail, that not everything I did would be complete or polished, but if I approached it with passion and as a learner myself, that my students would embrace and appreciate my efforts. I particularly love teaching the lower-level courses because

I have now seen the beauty of the mathematics in these courses through the eyes of new learners, and continue to find new ways to view what I once saw as basic.

For the next six years the plot of *Groundhog Day* began to feel familiar to me. Professionally I repeatedly “woke up” to the same “day.” As the institution planned the needs for each academic year, I submitted my application, interviewed, and was hired to teach the same set of courses year after year. I bounced through every type of academic position available: Adjunct, part-time fixed term, and full-time fixed term. The cycle seemed never-ending, I had no security and could not see a future that took me past the current “day.” In fact, as of today I have applied for, been interviewed, and accepted a position at the same institution seven times. This in addition to submitting fourteen yearly professional development reports and completing reviews by colleagues and administration on each. I have been well-vetted.

While my teaching had changed immeasurably thanks to my time with my children, I still had to figure out how to balance other professional expectations. I constantly tried to prove to my colleagues that I deserved the faith they placed in me by rehiring me. Yes was my answer to any opportunity. I was someone who had held every type of faculty position at an institution, who had longevity and experience, and yet was considered “new faculty” all at the same time, without a voice or place at the table. Having this experience taught me how to distinguish between valuable requests and those that wouldn’t help me grow professionally. I learned which colleagues lifted me up and which would tear me down, who to work with and who to avoid. These lessons translated over to my life as a mother and aided me in selecting what experiences and people I wanted to contribute to my parenting.

I watched as colleagues who had begun their careers alongside of me had arrived at point C and then at point D without much diversion on their path, and colleagues hired in tenure-track positions after me approaching these same milestones. None of them were mothers, and a model of how to proceed did not exist for me. I was moving but certainly not in any way considered “forward” or with clear direction or goals. I was not even remotely approaching or close to the academic success and security my colleagues possessed. I struggled with trying to decide if points C and D were where I actually wanted to arrive, yet unable to define what I would be in the

academic world without those goals. I wavered between feeling confident in my choices to doubting myself, wondering if there were any other possible ways I could have managed my life.

During this time I had my fourth child. When he began kindergarten, I was able to secure a full-time fixed term position (after applying, interviewing, etc. yet again). My children no longer needed my constant attention, and I was now in a place where I felt I could balance the demands of both mathematics and motherhood, knowing each role would only enhance the other.

I held this position for four years, the maximum allowable under union rules. In my fourth year, the department requested and was granted a tenure-track position. I had come to the place where I realized I could balance motherhood with mathematics, and that they weren't mutually-exclusive paths but were inextricably entwined. I realized I actually wanted the tenure-track position. I wanted to reach points C and D even if it was on a timeline much longer than the norm, and so I applied.

And here is how I find myself listening to the muffled voices through the wall and the phone start to ring in the office next to mine. The search committee, treating me like all other candidates, was required to call me at my office for a phone interview. The irony of a phone interview with people five feet away on the other side of a wall that I'd known for over fifteen years, asking me questions they already knew the answers to was not lost on me. Nonetheless the institution requires this structure, and in doing so, triggered the start of a period of time in my life that was temporarily excruciating, much like childbirth. Painful and filled with doubt and worry but concluding with a result worth every moment.

I'm that unusual case. The person who interviewed and accepted a tenure-track position twice, at the same institution. I had arrived at the same point, but I was no longer the same person. And at this point I was emerging as a changed woman, occupying a different trajectory, much like Phil in *Groundhog Day*. I had proved true Madeline Albright's statement "I do think women can have it all, but not all at the same time. Our life comes in segments, and we have to understand that we can have it all if we're not trying to do it all at once."



The second time around as a tenure-track faculty member is different. I'm not young and naive any longer. I have a lot of experience to shape my decisions and career. I have a very clear understanding of the structure and politics of my institution and how to navigate them, that I did not possess the first time. I know there is life outside the institution, and that life provides experiences that support and inform my career as much as life inside the institution. I have achieved tenure and promotion to Professor more quickly than I would have in my first go-round, thanks to the years of experience and institutional knowledge gained along the way. I am finally "senior faculty." However, the institution and my colleagues did not treat me as such when I first began this second track, and it was a strange balancing act of being new and experienced at the same time. There were advantages and pitfalls. Perhaps there is more to be written here, but that will have to be another time.

Given that we know families take time and investment, largely on the part of females, I am continually struck by the inflexibility of institutions of higher education in offering employment paths that complement family life and build up faculty careers. My story should not be unusual. In fact, I should not have had to make such a stark choice between career and family. I should not have had to spend twenty years in an unsecure position, reapplying for my job and constantly proving myself worthy, all while being looked at as "junior faculty." While I do not feel I should have been given a pass or achieved tenure and promotion milestones at the same rate as my colleagues who didn't opt to have children or opt to be home with them, I should not have been thrown off the track completely only to scramble, overworked and insecure, to get back on. We need to do better for our fellow colleagues; we need to give them permission and the space to not do it all at once yet achieve the success they deserve without such dire choices or being stuck in a time loop.