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PB & J

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PB & J

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Synopsis

In this essay on academic life as a mother and a mathematician, I explore pregnancy in graduate school, parenting on the tenure-track, division of household labor, and sandwiches.

Keywords: *parenting, motherhood, early career*

“Sebastian told me that he only had two slices of plain bread for lunch.” I thought back to the morning. Could it be that I forgot to put the peanut butter and jelly on his sandwich? Yes, that sounds about right. I sent my son to school with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with no peanut butter and jelly. I laughed.

“Why are you laughing? It’s not funny.”

“There’s nothing I can do about it now. Literally, the only thing I can do about it is laugh.”

Sebastian is in first grade. Before the school semester started, my husband, Ryan, and I created a list to break up the parenting and household responsibilities. We designed the list for a ‘normal’ working week, with full knowledge that not a single week would look like the one we laid out over coffee on a Saturday morning. According to this list, I am in charge of getting Sebastian to school with lunch, and Ryan is in charge of making sure he gets picked up before the after-school center closes. Obviously I do not pull off every morning with grace.

Pre-arranged routines, however fallible, are crucial for my marriage. When Sebastian was an infant, I was a graduate student and Ryan worked regular daytime hours. We wanted to get by with minimal childcare expenses. At the time, I was taking courses and working on research. We arranged for a sitter to come three days a week for four hours while I attended class. Our sitter was flexible, and I could ask her to stay more hours if I needed them, but generally, we had a sitter for twelve to twenty hours a week. That was it. There was no help from family; we were doing it all by ourselves. So my plan was to watch Sebastian during the day while reading and doing busy work, and then write up problem sets and proofs in the evenings after Ryan got home.

That is how I planned it in my head; reality was different.

In reality, on a day I stayed home, I would get a half-hour of work done during naps or while bouncing brightly colored toys up and down. Then, Ryan would come home. I would assume that it was my time to work; I would pull out my computer and notebooks and start typing. But, here is the thing: Ryan also assumed that this was his time to work as well. He was working on his master's thesis. We thus both tacitly assumed that the other person was the acting lead-parent, and we would glare at each other sideways as we changed a diaper, washed a pacifier, or made entertaining funny faces.

We learned—there should always be one person designated as the lead-parent at any given time, and that person should be aware that they are acting in the role of the lead-parent. So we made a list. The list broke down all the evening hours, and designated the lead-parent. This clear delineation liberated both Ryan and myself from acrid combinations of guilt and resentment.

In retrospect, Ryan and I were naive about the time demands of parenthood. It takes all of your time. Every second. It's actually quite astonishing. In full health, I feel sluggish and wobbly if I get less than six hours of sleep. When Sebastian was an infant, I got far less, for months, and my body still worked—not well, but muscles still contracted and sensory input was still processed. You acclimate quickly to your new life.

I had Sebastian the summer after my first year of graduate school. It is isolating to be pregnant when most of the people around you are not, but it is a temporary status. I made it through morning sickness and the weird experience of taking qualifying exams while being kicked from the inside.

I was most worried about being ostracized; I feared that I would be discounted as a mathematician because I was a mother. As it turned out, my professors and fellow students were incredibly supportive. I believe the culture at the University of Illinois at Chicago should be commended for this—it helped that much of my cohort were women and that women were well-represented among the faculty. Most of my professors were parents themselves.

I was nervous about talking to the administrator in charge of graduate studies regarding accommodations. However, the conversation that I imagined would be uncomfortable turned out to be pleasant. She easily worked something out—instead of leading calculus discussions, I would grade for several upper-division classes. I am still extremely grateful for this accommodation, and believe this can be a great model for accommodation in other departments.

Over the next three years, I worked every spare second I had. With a child, you work whenever you are free, even if you are too tired. For a while, I got up early in the morning, before everyone else was awake. I am not naturally a morning person though, so that is a technique I save for times of absolute necessity. The moment Sebastian was potty-trained, we put him into full-time daycare. He enjoyed the regimented routine and making new friends; he thrived in the toddler milieu. And while he was at daycare, I was able to complete a couple of manuscripts, write a successful NSF postdoctoral application, obtain a tenure-track job, and finish my dissertation. It was worth every penny, both for me and for Sebastian.

The infant years were not the only years that I have operated in survival mode, and I am sure they won't be my last. When I started my tenure-track position at San José State University, Sebastian was four and Ryan was working as an archeological field technician. Ryan was working ten-day rotations, which meant that I was a single parent for ten days at a time while also getting into a new job. I didn't even know how to print from my computer or where to find dry-erase markers, and I had an hour-and-a-half commute each way. In addition, I made regular stops to drop off groceries to my mom, who was only intermittently taking her anti-psychotics. I reverted to the necessary organizing principle I used in Sebastian's infant years: you take care of life, then work every other spare second, even if you are too tired. We were back in California at this point, so we had family for support too, and I cashed in every favor.

Now that Sebastian is in grade school, the challenges are different. There is a vestigial assumption of a stay-at-home parent within the school system, even though most households no longer fit this pattern. Furthermore, I travel a lot. So this means there are more than a few comments about my schedule from other parents: “we never see you around,” and family members: “I think you are traveling too much.” It requires constantly putting things in perspective. Talking to other academic parents becomes invaluable. They understand your lifestyle; they help you take these things with a grain of salt—they know that your child will not be ruined because you couldn’t make it to the Halloween parade or forgot that it was pajama day. They know that these things are small in the big picture, and furthermore they know your child could multiply in kindergarten and can use the word “polytope” in a sentence. It will all be okay.

It also helps me to remember my aspirations in parenthood. While the outside world gives me ample opportunity to feel like a bad parent, I know that this is not the case—I am a good parent. I think I feel this way because my previous vision of parental life aligns with my current implementation of parenthood. I never fantasized about spending the infant years dawdling, and I certainly never fantasized about being timely with permission slips. I fantasized about giving my child a life of intellectual wonders, which, as academics, we are in a prime position to impart.

There will be times when my life will be hectic—when I will have to stay late, when I will have to write every waking moment, or when I will have to travel again (after just getting home), but it will be okay. I am teaching my child about perseverance, craft, curiosity, and discovery, and I can’t imagine it any other way.

And sometimes I will make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, which contains neither peanut butter nor jelly.