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## BALANCING ACT

### When to Procreate

#### A young scholar opts to give birth in graduate school rather than on the tenure track

By ANN STEELE

**July 2002:** Motherhood and dissertation writing are incompatible.

That is my thought as I arise from a fitful slumber to respond to my 2-year-old's cries. It is 3:35 a.m., and my son has had a bad dream. I tuck him back into bed, returning to his arms the bear and blanket that possess the power to ward off all things evil. I stumble back into bed. The interruption would not normally be so bad, but at seven months pregnant, I have already been awakened by my bladder at 1:30 a.m., and my dissertation kept me at my computer until 11:45 at night.

In a week I must fly out to the West Coast for a job interview. I have yet to finish my interview presentation and am scrambling to complete some last-minute analysis that my adviser deemed necessary. Never mind that we had already agreed that the analysis was complete two months ago. The additional analysis is a good idea, of course, but I am rapidly approaching the I-just-want-to-be-done stage.

I chose to have my first child during my graduate studies for several reasons. One is my biological clock, but an even stronger one was the desire not to be pregnant and on maternity leave during my first years as a tenure-track faculty member. It turned out to be a good choice. I had my son at the end of the course-work phase of my program, took my written and oral preliminary exams shortly after, and then started slowly into the research phase of my program. I never really had a maternity leave, but my schedule afforded me a lot of flexibility, and I was able to do a lot of work when my husband could be home with our baby. We were lucky to hire Mary Poppins as our part-time nanny, which saved me tremendous amounts of anxiety and lessened the load.

As we were contemplating having another child, the same issues arose: Do I have a baby now and juggle it and my dissertation? Do I start my new job pregnant, or do I try to get pregnant during my first year as a faculty member?

Our decision was to try to have the second child as soon after my dissertation defense as possible. Fortunately for us we seem to be able to conceive almost at will. We wanted an October birth, and this one is due October 4th! The problem is that it's July, and I thought I would be done with my graduate work by now, instead of struggling through the most intense stress I have ever experienced. Currently on my plate is the reanalysis of my data, finishing my thesis, preparing and teaching a summer course, going on job interviews, and trying to coordinate the schedules of five committee members so that we can all be in the same place (preferably not the delivery room) for my defense.

**August 2002:** The defense has been scheduled. In a gesture of supreme sympathy, one committee member will drive directly to my defense, upon arriving home after two months in Munich. I am due to defend on October 2nd and to deliver two days later. No problem, I tell myself, my first child was two weeks late.

The strain is building. I tell my husband I do not feel stressed, but the night before I am supposed to fly out for my job interview I go into labor. It turns out to be false labor, but I end up spending the night before my interview in the hospital, hooked up to monitors and injected twice with Trebutaline. I am released in time to shower, change, and catch my plane.

**September 2002:** It honestly never occurred to me that there might be a prejudice against hiring a woman so visibly in the throes of motherhood.

This is an enlightened and politically correct age, and there are many woman and mothers in my field. I was therefore shocked and horrified when during an interview for a tenure-track opening at my own university, the head of the department asked me if I would maybe prefer to apply for the non-tenure-track position for which he was also interviewing. I asked him why he would think that I would want to do that when I am clearly more qualified for the tenure-track search. He wondered aloud, "maybe, since you are having your second child, you have changed your mind about the career direction you want to take. A tenure-track position isn't going to allow you as much time for your family."

My first reaction was pure fury. I would be willing to bet the farm that he didn't make that offer to the two other top male candidates. How dare he suggest that to me? How much more sexist could a person be? I went home and vented to my husband and called my best friend who is a lawyer and discussed the legal ramifications of such a statement. I stewed and fumed and finally decided to try to just let it go.

I spent the next day at the zoo. I delighted in watching my toddler nearly shake with joy upon seeing the baby farm-animal exhibit. It was a Thursday, and this was a special day at the zoo just for toddlers. We practically had the place to ourselves. As we were sitting in the shade eating ice cream, I realized that if I were in my tenure-track position I would not be doing this right now. Someone else would be taking him to this event or he wouldn't go.

I suddenly looked at the conversation with my department chairman differently. He knows me very well and is a kind and thoughtful man. His question, however inappropriate, was meant as an offer of another alternative - perhaps to allow me to know that there were other choices available if that was what my family and I needed.

**June 2003:** By some miracle I completed everything and successfully defended my dissertation on the scheduled day and gave birth the next.

What happened on the job front? I was offered and accepted a tenure-track position at an Eastern research university, but I delayed my start date for nine months. As I write, I have two weeks remaining before I hang up my stay-at-home mom hat and put on my faculty hat.

Did I make the right choice? Will I end up missing too much of my children's lives? Is a tenure-track position compatible with motherhood? I don't know yet.

I do know that no matter how far society has come to combat gender bias, it still exists. But things are more complicated than that. Before I had children I never would have admitted this, but handling motherhood alongside a dissertation has brought me a wisdom that has nothing to do with science, education, or academe.

There *is* a difference between the role that most women play in their children's lives and the role that most men

play. Does that mean a woman shouldn't have any job she desires? No, of course not. Does it mean that it was appropriate to suggest that my family situation might impair my ability to perform in a job? Again, of course not.

But it does mean that each woman needs to assess her own ability and desire to give up a part of her mothering role if she is going to have a demanding full-time career. This is a personal assessment that needs to be done internally over the course of a very long time. Perhaps the decision cannot even be made until you have lived the life for a while.

Personally, I know that I have a strong desire to follow my professional goals of teaching and research, and that failing to take a tenure-track position now could eliminate the possibility of that career path forever.

I also know that I love my children more than anything and that they will always be my first priority. So I approach my new job with excitement and a little bit of dread. I know that I must live this path and see where it takes me.

*Ann Steele is the pseudonym of a Ph.D. in neuroscience who is starting her first tenure-track job at an Eastern research university. You can find an archive of previous *Balancing Act* columns [here](#).*

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