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Finding a Balance: A Narrative Inquiry into Motherhood and the Doctoral Process

Brooke Eisenbach

University of South Florida, brooke.eisenbach@gmail.com

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Abstract

Carolyn Ellis states, "autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense - making... [it] wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). This autoethnography describes one new mother's struggles to complete her doctoral program of study while remaining devoted to her familial obligations and relationships. In particular, this article investigates the causes of tension and stress that exist as she attempts to find a balance between her need to care and love for her child, to maintain a relationship with her husband, and achieve success within her graduate studies. Using autoethnography, the author makes herself vulnerable as she shares her intimate experiences through personal journal entries and stories of encounters with family and friends. In this way, the author hopes to utilize her personal experience in an effort to open dialogue concerning the diverse needs of today's graduate student mothers as they attempt to successfully earn a graduate degree.

Keywords

Motherhood, Doctoral Program, Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry

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Finding a Balance: A Narrative Inquiry into Motherhood and the Doctoral Process

Brooke Eisenbach
University of South Florida, Tampa, FL USA

Carolyn Ellis states, “autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making... [it] wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). This autoethnography describes one new mother’s struggles to complete her doctoral program of study while remaining devoted to her familial obligations and relationships. In particular, this article investigates the causes of tension and stress that exist as she attempts to find a balance between her need to care and love for her child, to maintain a relationship with her husband, and achieve success within her graduate studies. Using autoethnography, the author makes herself vulnerable as she shares her intimate experiences through personal journal entries and stories of encounters with family and friends. In this way, the author hopes to utilize her personal experience in an effort to open dialogue concerning the diverse needs of today’s graduate student mothers as they attempt to successfully earn a graduate degree. Keywords: Motherhood, Doctoral Program, Autoethnography, Narrative Inquiry

“At least half of those who start the doctoral process, don’t finish it,” stated my professor matter-of-factly. My small cohort and I sat together around the conference room table. The atmosphere was a bit stifling despite the fact that the air conditioning was cranked down to seventy. You would never know that outside, a brisk December wind whipped through the crowded parking lot and campus walkways. It could be that the thirteen warm bodies, occupying a space more fitting for a walk-in closet, caused conditions similar to those experienced in the July Florida sun, or, it might have been my own imagination that created such conditions. Maybe it was simply my sudden dismay and aggravation having noticed the faces of my peers shifting ever so slightly in my direction. Were they looking at me? Of course they were. The instructor’s simple comment was likely to cause an eye or two to turn my way. After all, I was the only doctoral student in the class sporting a stomach worthy of notice. I was the only seven-month pregnant woman in the room. Of course they expected me to be one of the unfortunate ones who would ultimately quit.

Yet, I have always been a focused, driven student. I have always finished my assignments in a timely manner and to the best of my ability. Actually, I have typically completed my work well in advance of assigned deadlines. My peers were aware of my dedication. They understood my passion for learning. They couldn’t possibly expect that I would be the one to fail. Could they?

Maybe the cause of my distress had nothing to do with this invisible judgment. Was it possible that my discomfort stemmed from my own self-doubt brimming to the surface? My dream had always been to be a caring, involved mother. I could remember times in my own childhood when my father was too busy to attend piano recitals, dance recitals, and band concerts. I promised myself that I would never be *that* parent. I would be a mother who extended time, energy, and most importantly, bestowed love on my children. Would the doctoral program allow me the flexibility to be the dedicated and attentive parent that I so

desired or would I find myself treading water, trying to stay afloat amid an endless succession of assignments, work, and dirty diapers?

This single moment spawned a question within my mind. How do women navigate the world of academia while fulfilling familial obligations and what potential obstacles stand between mothers and their efforts to successfully complete a program of study? After all, there have to be plenty of women out there who have managed to successfully manage a home, work, and a graduate program of study...right? How do they do it? How will *I* do it?

Journal Entry – February 25, 2011

My life changed forever today. This morning, at 6:27a.m., I gave birth to the most *beautiful* 8 lb. 6 oz. girl that *ever existed!* (I'm sure all mothers say that, but when I say it, it's true.)

It was a day that will live on within my mind, my heart, and my soul for the rest of my life. I was nervous, to say the least. Here I was, suddenly being whisked down the hospital hallway to the operating room in preparation for a c-section; major surgery! Yet, after I was wheeled in and greeted by the staff, the bright lights, and the antiseptic smell, my worry seemed to vanish. I wasn't scared, rather, I was ecstatic! It hit me that I was about to have my baby! I was about to become a mommy! I couldn't wait to find out if Scott (my husband) and I were about to be blessed with a little boy or a little girl.

We made the conscious decision to wait until the birth to learn if we were having a boy or a girl. Of course, everyone thought we were having a boy. For the past nine months, my family and friends seemed to speak non-stop about the shape of my belly and the way that I was carrying. My family, friends, colleagues, classmates, even my professors weighed in and cast a vote. Now the moment of truth had arrived and I couldn't wait. To be honest, I secretly hoped for a little girl, but I knew that no matter what the gender, I would be happy. I only prayed for a healthy child.

After I was prepped and the doctor was ready to begin, Scott made his entrance in his stunning scrubs. I will never forget the way he looked adorned in his hair net, face mask, and paper shoe covers. I'm so happy he was able to be there with me. The doctor cranked up the radio to a local country station and the sound of Darius Rucker's "This" surrounded me; a rather fitting song, I thought. Scott took my hand, brushed the hair back from my face, and gave me a kiss.

"We're about to have a baby! Are you ready for this?" he asked with tears in his eyes.

"Ready or not, it's time for baby!" I responded with a smile.

After a great deal of pressure, puking, and an awful headache, our baby arrived.

"Do you want to know the sex?" the doctor questioned.

"YES!" we exclaimed together. What did she think? Of course we wanted to know.

"It's a girl!"

Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!!! We have a little girl! We have a daughter! Oh my God!

I only wish I could have held her right away. Scott kissed me, told me how much he loved me, and then stood to join Olivia at her plastic bassinet. I watched from the operating table as they checked her vitals and allowed Scott the honor of cutting the cord. The nurse then swaddled her in blankets and brought her to my side so that I might gaze upon my daughter for the first time. I was speechless. Tears cascaded from my eyes as I looked at this amazing being, this child that was a part of me only moment ago.

"Hi, Olivia. I'm mommy! You're so beautiful! I love you so much!" were the first words I shared with my daughter before the nurse took her from my side and returned her to the warmer.

Scott escorted the nurse and Olivia back to the hospital room as I remained on the operating table, waiting for the doctor to finish closing and stitching me up.

The rest of the day passed by in a whirlwind of visits, congratulations, and hugs. It is now after midnight as I sit in my hospital bed while my daughter, Olivia Paige, sleeps. Scott doesn't look too comfortable on the "pull-out chair" but I'm sure he's okay. His snoring assures me that he is finally getting some much needed sleep.

I can't wait for EVERYONE to meet her. I can't help but gaze upon her angelic face every minute! She's just so gorgeous! She's perfect! Ten fingers! Ten toes! Healthy!

I never knew I could love someone so much. My heart overflows with love.

Journal Entry – May 9, 2011

Welcome to a new semester! I am so nervous about how I'm going to effectively manage everything now that the summer term has started. It was hard enough completing my coursework and working full-time while I was pregnant. Now, I have a young baby in need of love and attention. It's no longer a matter of dividing my time and energy between my husband, my work, and my studies. I now have a precious little girl who takes priority over everything else.

I would have loved to have been able to take a semester off and spend the first few months of Olivia's life at home, but I know that if I take a break from my coursework, I will only fall behind and risk never returning.

Now, I find myself facing a full-course load, working as a graduate teaching assistant, and taking care of my home, husband, and daughter. I've just finished reviewing the course syllabus for each of my classes and I must say, it's going to be an interesting ride!

I'm so thankful to have family nearby. At least there are people in my life that will do whatever they can to help me. My mother-in-law has made this very clear. Every time I see her she is quick to remind me that she can be called on to babysit any time I might need her.

"I'm only a phone call away," she states with a smile. "I love watching my granddaughter. Even if you just need a break or time to finish an assignment, give me a ring and I'll head right over."

I'd be lying to myself if I didn't admit that I'm nervous and a bit stressed. But I have a wonderful support system. I just have to remember that this is temporary and it will be worth it in the end.

Grandmother- "Babysitter"

I had another hour before it was time to head to class. Olivia was still napping soundly in her bassinet as I finished getting dressed and touching up my make-up. I gave myself a once over in the bathroom mirror. I was still trying to get used to my new post-baby body, but figured that I looked suitable enough for class.

"Hello! I'm here," I heard a voice coming from the front door.

I wasn't the only one to hear the announcement. Olivia began to move about in her bassinet and let out a small cry.

Great, I thought, just when she was getting in a nice, solid nap. It figures Sandra would wake her up.

I had to quickly remind myself that no harm was intended. After all, my mother-in-law was doing me a favor by watching Olivia once a week so that I could make it in time to class. I was just aggravated and a bit frustrated having to leave Olivia so often. The transition from mommy to student was still new to me. In fact, I still cried a little every time I drove away and headed to campus.

“We’re back here! Be there in just a second!” I called back as I scooped up my baby and made my way to the foyer. “Hi!”

“Hi sweetie,” stated Sandra as she leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. “And there’s my little angel! Hi sweet Olivia,” she cooed as she reached out and took Olivia from my arms.

Stop it, I told myself, She’s entitled to hold the baby. It’s okay that she took her. You have to get to class. Let it go. Let it go.

“Do you need to finish getting ready? You look lovely. I can hold her while you get ready,” noted Sandra as she walked into the living room and took a seat on the couch.

“Nope. I’m ready. She napped pretty well today so I actually had time for a quick shower.”

“Oh. That’s good,” responded Sandra as she continued to gaze down upon Olivia. “You’re handling things beautifully. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks. It’s still a bit tough but I think I’m starting to get the hang of it. Especially since you guys are able to help us out so much.”

“Of course! I love helping you. I get to be grandmother and take care of my little granddaughter, so I love that you’re in school. And I know that you wouldn’t be able to do this without us. I mean, you just wouldn’t. You need us. You need our support. But I love being grandmother,” continued Sandra. “Isn’t that right, Olivia? Yes! Yes! Yes, that’s right!” she responded for the silent baby.

She was right. I did need them. I need their support (Greiner & Burke, 2008). There’s no way I’d be able to make it to class on time if it wasn’t for her. Of course, knowing me, I’d take Olivia to class with me before I’d resign myself to giving up.

“You’re very driven,” Sandra continued, “I think that’s wonderful. I wouldn’t call it ‘stubborn,’ I’d call it driven. You’re not the kind to start something that you’re not going to finish. I mean, I didn’t finish. I already had three kids when I tried to earn my Masters degree and it was very difficult. I gave up. I stopped. You’re moving along really well with things.”

“Thank you, Sandra. Sometimes I wonder if being driven is going to be enough. I mean, right now, I have things pretty good. I have you to watch her once a week and my mom to watch her once a week. But, in just a few months I have to return to work. That’s going to be interesting.”

“Well, I think right now, you’re doing fine. Once you go back to work, and you try a semester, and you find that it’s too much, then you can make the decision to quit. But right now, I can see that you have a routine. I think you’re going to have to balance your time and be very careful once you’re back at work because you’re going to have another demand and that’s going to be difficult. But I know you, and I know that you will finish your program. There’s no question about that.” Sandra smiled at Olivia. “But right now, you need to head to class. You’re going to be late.”

At this, I gave Olivia a kiss on the forehead and gathered up my books. “Thanks, Sandra. Scott should be home soon,” I said as I headed out the door and towards another evening at school.

Journal Entry – June 16, 2011

It’s amazing how the little things can brighten what might otherwise be another busy, hectic day. Olivia rolled over for the first time today! The best part of this is that I was there to see it!

Olivia was just waking up from her first afternoon nap. I put aside my coursework, closed my laptop, and made my way into her bedroom to greet her as she opened her eyes. She gave a slight smile before I picked her up, changed her diaper, and carried her into the living room.

I decided that it was tummy time. She had been making progress in her attempts to roll over and I wanted to see if today might be the day that she succeeded in flipping from her belly to her back.

I spread her fluffy blankets onto the wooden floor, placed her on her belly, and put her favorite toy, a small Eeyore doll, off to one side in the hope that her desire for the toy might entice her to roll over.

“Come on, Olivia! You can do it! Roll over, baby!” I cheered as she looked up at me and smiled.

I heard the ping of my email account notifying me of an incoming message but chose to ignore it. I knew that whatever it might be, it could wait until later. After all, some things take precedence over a class email.

I’m so thankful that I made that decision. No sooner had I looked back from the computer atop the dining room table to Olivia on her pink, princess blanket that she suddenly flipped over! She did it!

I cheered a little too loudly, startling my sweet girl, and swept her up into my arms. Within seconds I had my cell phone in hand and sent a text message to my mom notifying her of this “first.” I couldn’t wait to share this with her. It was truly amazing!

Journal Entry – June 29, 2011

Today, I celebrated another birthday. My 30th! Interesting how I always thought 30 was old and now that I have hit this momentous mark in my life, I still feel so young.

I canceled class tonight so that I would have the opportunity to spend my 30th birthday with the ones I love. This put my course a week behind, but I felt it would be worth it. I mean, I NEVER get out anymore. I don’t have the time. I should at least be able to go out to dinner on my birthday, right? Is that asking too much? Is that being selfish? I don’t think so. Yet, I find it to be rather sad that I have to even question this. It’s hard not to when I think of all the homework and lesson planning that I *should* be doing, rather than going out to eat. Oh well. What’s done is done.

I selected the restaurant because I knew it could accommodate a large group and I expected to savor my favorite dish on the menu. This shows how long it’s been since I actually went out! The item I requested hasn’t been on the menu for months, at least, that’s what the waitress told me as she looked at me with a gaze that seemed to suggest I must live under a rock.

I wanted to say, “I’m sorry. I work, attend graduate school, and have a new baby at home! I don’t get out much!” but decided against it.

My goal for the evening was to take a break from my hectic schedule, sip a glass of wine and just enjoy my dinner. After all, I’m entitled to a one-night reprieve, right? One night with no homework to complete, no dishes to wash, no clothes to fold, no emails to send, no assignments to grade? One night??

Yet, I found that even as I sat amidst my family and friends, surrounded by friendly banter and the intoxicating aroma of someone else’s cooking, my mind continued to wander and drift towards the papers, laundry, dishes, and emails awaiting my return home.

I was disappointed that so many of my friends were unable to attend. Four of them had class (they were off last week so they didn’t want to ask to miss another session) and another had to teach a course this evening. They plan to make it up to me by taking me out for a “girl’s” night soon. Yeah, right. I LOVE the idea, but honestly, I’m not sure when I will have the time. Maybe we can all go out once the semester ends. I’ll have a two-week break before the start of a new term. I’m sure Scott won’t mind watching Olivia for one evening so that I can get out.

Journal Entry – July 4, 2011

Well, this is a first. Every year, I visit my parent's condo on the beach for the fourth of July. We spend the day riding the waves, walking along the shoreline, and soaking in the sun. At night, we sit along the beach wall and watch the parade of amateur fireworks as they explode in the evening sky. Not this year. Not that I didn't want to, but Scott led me to make the responsible decision to stay home.

I was overloaded with homework this weekend. I also needed to prep for class since I canceled our meeting last week for my birthday. I hoped to be able to get everything done prior to the Fourth, but it just wasn't possible. Scott decided to be the voice of reason.

"Babe, I *know* you want to go, but do you really think you'll be able to get all of your work done if we do?"

I knew he was right. I did. I just didn't want to acknowledge it. I was looking forward to Olivia's first Fourth of July. I wanted to let her dip her little toesies into the sand and water. I wanted to take her for her first splash in the kiddie pool. I wanted to let her see fireworks pop in the sky. Unfortunately, it appears that this dream will simply have to wait.

I just have to remind myself that this is temporary. I will finish my degree and have more time to spend sharing moments with her. It will be worth it in the end. We'll have next year. Maybe next year we can take her to Disney to see the fireworks. After all, she's too young to really understand right now. In fact, she would have been asleep before the fireworks even started.

Taking a Break for Television (for the Husband)

"Are you about finished with your work for tonight," questioned Scott from the couch, "I was hoping we could watch an episode of *How I Met Your Mother* together while Olivia is still asleep."

"Yeah," I responded without glancing up from my laptop screen, "just give me a second. I have one more email to respond to and I can stop for a while." In truth, I knew that I had a lot more to do if I had any hopes of keeping my head above water. I had a number of looming deadlines – books to read, articles to scour, papers to write – and I knew that if I couldn't afford to put things off until the last minute. I never knew when Olivia might get sick or when I'd go another night without much sleep. The more that I could manage to complete in advance, the better chance I'd have to maintain my sanity.

"Okay. Well, hurry up," responded my husband.

Fifteen minutes later, I stopped typing and resigned myself to the cushion beside Scott. "Okay, babe. Let's watch one."

"Are you sure you have time," he asked.

Well, no. To be honest, I don't have the time to sit here and spend half an hour watching a television show. In fact, despite the fact that I am going to be physically present in watching this show with you, my mind will be elsewhere. I'm going to be thinking about the paper I need to write. How will I begin it? Do I have enough research to support my ideas? How many words did the professor say it should be?

"Sure. Just go ahead and pick one though. I have some other things to finish before bed tonight," I responded.

"You're stubborn. You know that?" Scott stated as he looked up at me.

Oh great. A fight? Really? I don't have time for this. I don't have energy for this. I hope Olivia doesn't wake up.

"Keep your voice down. You might wake the baby," I state with slight hostility.

“You don’t spend time with me anymore. Sure, you occasionally try and stay up and watch t.v. or something after Olivia goes to bed, but the key word there is that you *try*. Things would be so much easier for us if you weren’t in school. *But*, if that’s what you’re going to do, that’s what you’re going to do.”

“What do you mean? Do you want me to quit? Do you think I’m going to fail?”

“No, no, no. I don’t want you to quit. And I know you’re not going to fail. Your stubbornness helps you make it. I mean, you could easily pick it back up in a couple of years when Olivia’s more grown and can take care of herself more. But you choose not to. It is what it is.”

“Do you think I’m wrong for that? Is it wrong that I want to finish this program *and* be a great mom? Am I being unfair to Olivia?”

“No, I don’t think it’s wrong. I mean, you do a good job of being both a mom and a student. Of course, you didn’t ask about the wife part. You just don’t spend time with me anymore.

“I don’t think you’re being unfair to *her*. She gets plenty of time. Just to *me*. Like this weekend, could we have gone to the beach for the Fourth? Yeah! We could have. But you have *a lot* of work to do. And if you have a lot of work to do, you gotta make sacrifices.”

Wow. He is really putting it out there. I know he’s right. I don’t spend much time with him lately. In fact, I can’t remember the last time we were intimate. Maybe I’ve been spending so much time trying to be a great mommy and a successful student that I have forgotten to be a wife.

“So what do you want from me? I only have so much to give, Scott! I only have so much,” I cried, “I want to have time for you, I love you. But you have to know that this is just temporary. Things will get back to normal. You just have to be an adult about it right now and understand that.”

“I just wish you’d get it over with already because it really doesn’t matter. You aren’t going to stop anyways. No matter what I say. You aren’t going to stop.”

I didn’t know what more to say. He was right. I wasn’t going to stop. Was it my determination to succeed that kept me from surrendering or had this become some sort of personal mission? Who was I really trying to prove myself to anyway? Would my marriage survive? Was it worth the time I was losing with my husband? Was it worth *losing* my husband?

A Lunch Date with Perspective

“You’re my hero,” stated my friend, Tiffany, matter-of-factly. We had just sat down to a quick lunch. Each of us had our babies strapped into their carriers, resting on the seats of our adjoining booths.

Wait a minute. I’m her hero? She must elaborate.

“What do you mean,” I ask as I spread Olivia’s blanket across her tiny legs and feet to protect her from the chill of the restaurant air.

“You’re just so determined. You have the intellect, ability, drive, and desire to complete your program. And you *will* finish. Hell will freeze over and you’ll ice skate to class,” Tiffany responds as she begins to dig into her salad.

I can’t help but give a slight laugh at her choice in words. “It’s hard though.”

“Tell me about it! I’m a teacher, a mommy, and a grad student, like you. That’s why I am a great shoulder for you to cry on. Everything you bring to me, any complaints, anything you want to bitch about, I understand entirely because I’m going through similar struggles in every aspect of my life.”

It's true. Tiffany is going through similar struggles. Our daughters are only two months apart and while she is enrolled in a Master's program, and I am in a doctorate program, the course work is intense for both. Yet, I wonder if she is encountering as much trouble in her marriage as I seem to be having in my own. I also know that she has recently returned to work. I wonder how she is now managing to balance life with an added career.

Tiffany continues, "I put you on a pedestal."

Great, more pressure to succeed, whether she means to or not.

"I don't know how you do it. I'm very hesitant to do it myself. Resuming another semester with an infant is the most daunting thing ever. I watch you fight through taking classes and teaching undergraduates while balancing being a great mommy. I'm super proud of you and I hope to learn from your Yoda-like ways so that don't completely fall out of school and neglect my child," Tiffany states with a smile as she glances down at her young daughter sleeping soundly beside her.

She wants to learn from me? Wow. I must make this appear easier than I thought!

"You don't think that I neglect Olivia too much do you? I mean, really? So often I worry that I'm not spending much time with her and once I return to work it's only going to get worse."

"When we talk as girlfriends, I notice that we tend to talk more about school and work than we do motherhood. However, I don't think I've seen you once without your daughter. The five or six times that we've been able to get together within the past months, Olivia has been at every single juncture. So, I don't think you're really tipping any one way more than the other in life."

It was wonderful to hear this from a friend. I needed the reassurance more than I thought. If Tiffany could balance motherhood and school, I could too! The only question was, which of us were really guiding the other? Was her attempt at managing a household and a graduate program an inspiration for me or was I serving as the inspiration for her? Perhaps, we could work as a team to help guide and support one another throughout this juncture in our lives. Having a close friend who could truly understand my struggles and provide support when I might feel the desire to quit is essential if I hope to succeed (Chartrand, 1992).

Journal Entry – July 7, 2011

Seriously? I *knew* my overachieving ways would come back to bite me. One time. One time I forget to help someone out and people are upset with me. I'm so stressed.

A couple of my classmates needed me to help them with a project. They sent me two questions to answer and I swear, I thought I did! I remember opening their email and hitting the reply button but something must have interrupted me because evidently, I never submitted my response. I don't doubt that I became distracted. I opened the email in the early morning. Olivia might have just woken up, or she might have had a dirty diaper that suddenly needed changing, or perhaps it was time for a bottle. Whatever the cause, I didn't deliberately fail to respond to their inquiry.

"I was surprised," Ann stated with a smile, "You're usually one to be quick with things."

I felt awful, yet, I *knew* that it was an accident. My friends just don't understand. They don't have children. They aren't sitting on the couch, balancing a baby in one arm, a bottle under their chin, and attempting one-handed typing with the other hand. They don't have to put off homework, projects, and reading assignments until the wee hours of the night, early hours of the morning, or weekends in order to spend time with their child and husband throughout the week. They don't listen to sound of "Mickey Mouse Clubhouse" or a poor

rendition of Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star in the background as they attempt to revise an article for journal submission.

I feel terrible that I let an assignment slip by without notice, but there are times when other things simply have to take precedence. I can't keep beating myself up every time I fail to finish *everything*. There are only so many hours in a day and so many directions I can be pulled at one time.

Guilt-Free Dialing

"Hello," sounded my mother's voice across the telephone receiver.

"Hi," I murmured back. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing much. Just getting ready to cook dinner. Why? What's up?"

"I'm just stressed out. Olivia's been crying all day long. I think she's teething or something and now I'm headed to class. I'm just frustrated. I don't know if I can do this," I sobbed into the phone.

"It'll be okay. You're just having a difficult time right now. It's sure more than *I* would want to handle. But, you're doing a good job," my mom reassured me. "You've been getting all of your work done and you're taking care of Olivia. She's not neglected and it seems like you're able to handle it."

"Do you really think I can do this, Mom? I mean, really? Because sometimes I'm not so sure,"

"You'll finish. I'm sure you will. You finish everything you start. Now, I think you should just do it, go straight through because once you stop, it's hard to get started again. You'll do it. I don't think most women could do it. But, you're different because you have a Type A personality. You set your mind to something and you do it. A lot of other people don't. They try. They figure out it's difficult and they give up. But you take after me. With you, I have no concerns at all."

"Really?"

"Yes. Now, I know you'll have days when you call me and you're frustrated and you need to vent. That's what I'm here for. That, and to be the Tuesday night babysitter."

At this I am finally able to let out a slight giggle. I find my cries beginning to subside as my mother continues to talk to me over the phone.

"I think what you're doing is great! I think if everybody chips in and does what they can to help you out, you should be able to get your doctorate *and* be a mom *both*," she states. "I just can't wait until the next couple of years are over and it's all behind you and you'll be glad you did it."

"Thanks, Mom. I needed to hear that," I respond with a sign of relief.

"Of course. Now, just relax and breathe and enjoy class. Olivia will be happy to see you when you get home later."

"Bye, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too."

Even Super Woman Has Weakness

"Watch out everyone! Here comes 'Super Woman'!" exclaimed one of my colleagues as I made my way into the crowded teacher's lounge.

A smile curled my lips, hiding the stress and anxiety that lurked beneath the surface. "Ha. Thanks, Robert."

"I'm serious. I don't know how you do it. You are Super Woman. You should be proud of yourself," continued Robert.

“He’s right,” interjected Susan, “I earned my Master’s just a year ago and now I have little Bradley at home. There’s *no way* I’d be able to manage school right now. I’m exhausted all of the time as it is. If I had to add school to the mix, I’d lose my mind!”

“Thanks guys,” I responded as I looked around for a seat.

“I have to get back to class. I’ll see you ladies later,” stated Robert as he made his way out of the lounge and into the main hallway.

I found an available spot at an empty table, set my bagged lunch in front of me, and popped open a Mt. Dew. I needed the caffeine pick-me-up as I caught a breather before continuing my day in the classroom to be followed by an evening of Statistics.

“Can I sit?” questioned Susan.

“Of course,” I responded as I pulled out a chair.

“Thanks. I actually wanted to talk to you about something,” she whispered as she glanced around the room, seeking to ensure that we would be alone in our chat despite the presence of so many others.

“Okay. What’s up?”

“Well, it wasn’t that long ago that you had Olivia. She’s what, nine...ten months old now?”

“Almost ten months. I can’t believe it! Time really does fly by.”

Of course, it’s likely time has only passed so quickly because I’ve spent so much of it away from her. I can’t help but constantly wonder, how much have I really missed due to class and work? I missed her first time crawling. I missed seeing her stand up by herself for the first time. I miss tucking her in at night. I miss seeing her all day. God, I miss so much! Don’t cry. Don’t panic.

“Well. You know that Bradley is only a couple of months old now. But, did you ever go through... you know...” Susan scoots her chair a bit closer to me, “post-partem depression?”

She seems so embarrassed. But who am I kidding? I suffered with post-partem depression for months! I didn’t tell anyone but my doctor. I didn’t want my family and friends to think I was struggling. After all, I’m supposed to be ‘Super Woman’, right? If they knew my dark secret, it might shatter their belief in me. It might cause them to doubt my ability to succeed in school. And if they begin to doubt me... if I begin to doubt me...

“Actually, yes. I struggled with that for a while. In fact, it cost me a research partner at school.”

“Really? Why? Was your partner some kind of insensitive jerk?”

“No. Nothing like that. Actually, while I was going through post-partem depression, I was also experiencing incredible anxiety because of school and work. I was trying to find some way to balance everything and having a shitty time of doing it. When my professor decided to issue an assortment of group work, I had a really hard time finding a way to make it work for me. Before the partner activities, I had finally found a kind of niche for myself. I had my time planned out so that I could do my school work and make time for Olivia and Scott. But when I was required to meet additional times work on projects with other people, it threw a wrench in my meticulous plans.

One day I simply had an anxiety attack in the campus parking lot.”

“Oh my God, really?!”

“Yeah. I totally lost it on my partner. I screamed at him. Cried in front of him. Totally freaked out. Needless to say, he was more than happy to have a partner switch.”

“Wow. That’s crazy! Well, at least I know I’m not alone. I’ve been having a hard time with my own post-partem depression. I can’t imagine how I would handle it if I was still in school though. I don’t blame you for freaking out. I’m surprised it’s only happened once.”

“Oh, it’s happened more than once. In fact, I think there was a short while where it happened every Saturday morning after class.”

“Saturday class?!”

“Yep! I’ve been taking a full-time course load just to try and finish in decent time. I don’t want to take too long. The sooner I finish, the sooner I can spend more time with Olivia and Scott and hopefully work on having a second baby. There’s NO WAY I’d be able to manage everything if we had another child right now.”

“Wow. So you’re taking a full-time course load AND working full-time? I don’t blame you for having anxiety. Did you talk to your doctor about it? I’ve been thinking about talking to my doctor.”

“Yeah. I did. She gave me a prescription for Xanax.”

I’ve said too much. She’s going to judge me. She’s going to think that I should quit school. She’s going to think that I’ve taken on more than I can take.

“But you know, I don’t take it that often. Just when I feel my anxiety level rising,” I quickly add.

“Oh. Girl, don’t worry about it. I’ve taken it before. The job alone causes me so much stress and anxiety. Again, I can’t imagine what you must go through. Thanks for telling me though. It helps to know I’m not crazy,” shared Susan before moving to get up from her seat. “I have to go pick up my kids. But seriously girl, thank you. And if you ever need help or someone to watch Olivia for you so you and Scott can have a night out, just ask me. I’m here for you, Super Woman. Don’t worry. I’m sure you’ll make it. ” At this Susan stands and heads to the door.

Don’t worry? I wish I could get away without worrying. I wish that I had the belief in myself that so many people in my life seem to demonstrate. But, no. I seem to do a lot of worrying lately. I worry that my family and childcare workers are working harder to raise my daughter than I am. I worry that my husband and I will continue to fight and argue over the time that I must devote to my studies. Despite my attempts to focus on our relationship and make time for him whenever I can, I know that it’s truly not enough and it’s not fair to him. And to be honest, I worry that I won’t finish.

How do women do it? How do mothers find ways to balance each aspect of their life and complete a graduate program? How do we do it? How will I do it?

The postmodern global society calls for a greater emphasis on higher education for twenty-first century adults (Wilson & Hayes, 2000). Recent statistics show that adult learners now represent the majority of the population in higher education (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). Yet, despite the influx of adult learners, higher education is often criticized as being “irrelevant, unresponsive, and disconnected from those they seek to serve and those that fund them” (Wilson & Hayes 2000, p.449). Higher education is viewed by some as an “elitist environment” where “few institutions provide an even playing field, much less a nurturing environment for all” (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm 2001, p. 18). Adult learners are diverse in their needs when it comes to receiving a higher education. Unlike many of their younger counterparts, adult learners are often faced with the responsibility of balancing their career, a spouse, children, and household responsibilities along with their hopes of receiving a college degree.

In the view of critical feminist research, Gouthro (2002) argues that higher education marginalizes and discriminates against women. When compared to men, women are less likely to pursue advanced degrees and more likely to exit their program of study prior to completion (Kurtz-Costes, Halmke & Ulku-Steiner, 2006). Despite the growing number of

women enrolled in graduate studies, they are far more likely to encounter familial obligations that hinder their path to completion (Lynch, 2008). Limited studies in the area of gender differences in higher education lists complex life situations and childcare responsibilities as noted obstacles facing female graduate students, particularly those involved in doctoral studies (Brown & Watson, 2010).

Unlike undergraduate and masters level programs, doctoral studies require that students forge professional identities that will assist them in gaining notoriety and an added edge in the world of academia. If one hopes to acquire status and promise of a faculty position at the completion of her program, it is imperative that she conduct research, find avenues for publication, and attend as well as present at state and national conferences. While forging this new identity, many women are confronted with the added stress of creating or maintaining their current identities as wives and mothers, often finding that their place in the home and in the academic community are at odds with each other. Cultural assumptions of motherhood place added pressure and stress on the shoulders of women hoping to “successfully” navigate and fulfill their multiple roles and identities (Lynch, 2008).

Brown and Watson (2010) suggest that the female doctoral student’s journey through the PhD program is very much tied to her domestic situation. Motherhood has a profound effect on women at the doctoral-level as mothers tend to plan their program of study around their domestic demands and stress over the balance they must maintain between their academic and home life as well as their roles of student, wife, and mother (2010). Yet, research is limited with regard to this particular demographic. Few studies seek to reveal the areas of tension that exist for mothers within doctoral programs. It is my hope that this autoethnography of my personal experiences as a wife, new mother, and current doctoral student will provide a small, but important addition to this population and bring necessary attention to this group. Perhaps in revealing my own experiences as a mother and doctoral student, I can encourage discussion and contemplation amidst readers in an attempt to generate understanding for graduate mothers as they attempt to navigate this complex balance between family and academia.

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Author Note

Brooke Eisenbach is an English I instructor for Florida Virtual School and a doctoral student of English Education: Curriculum and Instruction at the University of South Florida. Her doctoral research interests focus on an examination of care in the middle level classroom through the lens of narrative inquiry. She can be contacted at boback@mail.usf.edu.

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