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# Living With the A-Word: Teaching and Mothering With Purpose

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## **Living with the A-Word: Teaching and Mothering with Purpose**

Before I begin talking to you about my own experiences as a teacher, scholar, and mother, I want to cite several works that have proved valuable to me as an academic who is also raising children. First, the findings of Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington in their book, *Women of Academe: Outsiders in the Sacred Grove* (1988), directly addresses the problematic and challenging situation of women in the more traditionally male-oriented sphere of the academy. Second, the writings of Sara Ruddick in *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (1989) provide fertile ground when one is considering motherhood or already is an intellectual mother concerned with the thoughtful and peaceful upbringing of her children. Third, the ideas of Charlene Canape in *The Part-Time Solution: The New Strategy for Managing Your Career While Managing Motherhood* (1990), offer practical guidance for the realities of balancing a career, academic or otherwise, with the demands of parenting. Last, only recently did a friend and former colleague make me aware of another book, *Coming of Age in Academe: Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy* (2000) by feminist scholar Jane Roland Martin, who specializes in the philosophy of education. This work appears to be forward-thinking in terms of women's relationships with each other and within the academy, as well as our estrangement from one another. It makes use of a perhaps very apt metaphor for women academics, adjunct or otherwise, as immigrants. While the book may ultimately prove to provide support and encouragement, as with most feminist scholarship, it simultaneously points out just how far we have yet to travel in terms of actual progress in our lives, careers, and interconnectedness as feminist scholars and teachers.

The same good friend who referred me to that book also spurred me to reflect on the working subtitle of my paper, "Making the Part-time Solution Work." She questioned me about the term itself and whether this was a purposeful decision on my part. I now realize that what I have been doing is teaching a full-time load with part-time wages. Thus, the term adjunct, or the "A-word" as my new title refers to it, is a more appropriate description, despite any negative connotations that may be attached to it. To be honest, I must also admit that I did not consciously choose to be non-tenure track, but rather accepted this status when several job searches didn't yield results and I decided to remain in the geographic area of my graduate studies. I did have two full-time instructorships before having children. However, despite nearly always having taught the equivalent of a full-time course load since they were born, only one semester did my kids have to attend daycare full-time due to my teaching five courses at two different campuses. Another particularly harrowing year was when I was teaching four courses at three different colleges, which were on different academic calendars. That was especially difficult. I offer this information as clarification of my background in mothering and teaching by way of introduction so you understand where I am coming from, despite the optimistic tone of my paper. As a good feminist and Germanist, perhaps I have not been sufficiently polemical on this topic; if not, I expect I will hear from you about that.

I am speaking to you at a most stimulating juncture in my parenting and professional career. My sons, aged 10 and 12, are poised on the threshold of adolescence, and thus are reaching the point of increased independence in terms of day-to-day routines such as hygiene, homework, and helping around the house. They certainly know what they like to do, which seldom involves playing with me anymore:

music, computer, friends, video games, and the like. We do still spend generous amounts of time together and talk daily, however. I am dreading the much-rumored day—if it indeed ever comes—when either or both of them withdraw from our close communication and bond. During the years I have spent as a mother, I have been lucky enough to enjoy plenty of time at home with the kids, thanks in part to a partner who works full-time. Nonetheless, over the past 13 years, I have also been able to stay active in my career by teaching at a variety of different colleges near our home. I have been afforded the privilege to develop my skills as a mother and a Germanist simultaneously, and for me this has been essential to a healthy psyche, self-image, and outlook on life as a mother and an adjunct.

After nearly 15 years with my Ph.D. in hand, I believe I have finally “found my niche” at a small liberal arts college, similar to the one where I got my Bachelor’s degree, in a department which until recently had become stagnated. And now, for the first time ever in my experience, the new chair of my department appears willing to support me as a valued member of the faculty and has shown a glimmer of hope for a full-time position, which I would readily accept. As an adjunct faculty member, one becomes wary of promises and does well to keep expectations realistic, when one is required to teach on a contract solely from one term to the next.

One example of dashed hopes happened to me back in 1997. I had taught at a prestigious small university in central Ohio as a visiting professor for three non-consecutive semesters, when I suddenly found myself without another anticipated semester there. I had been promised the job through a verbal offer from the senior faculty member (a woman) who was going on sabbatical. The junior professor of

German (a man), in the meantime, had hired someone else of his own choosing without consulting her, and, as it was the best-paying institution at which I had ever taught, I was, at the last minute, put it bluntly, screwed out of \$15,000. I was devastated. I contacted the dean and the departmental chair, to no avail. The verbal contract was, at this point, meaningless. Based on disappointing experiences such as this, it would be easy to become jaded, cynical, or bitter. I have seen just that happen with a couple of former colleagues. And I have certainly had my share of such feelings, most recently by experiencing what I would call a mid-life career crisis several years ago. I weathered that storm after some serious soul-searching and half-hearted investigation into other possible career branches such as translating, academic advising, and public school teaching, all of which I have tried, if briefly.

But I realized then, as I do now, that I truly love college teaching—the day-to-day contact with students; the creativity of the course activities and classroom setting; experiencing their ideas and learning. And, in addition, my love of language, culture and literature is just as strong. So despite the fact that I am consistently teaching first year language courses, I have been able to maintain my predilection in my professional pursuits, and have found ways to enliven what otherwise could become a deadening routine. (Here are a few ideas I have used to avoid this pitfall: Trying a new textbook; having the students get pen pals; using an online workbook; experimenting with other web resources; just varying the activities and approach as much as possible so as to remain fresh and inspiring.) Another asset for me has been flexibility. When German has not provided me with enough classes, I have taught ESL, cross-cultural

communication, second-language teaching methods, and freshman composition and literature in English, all of which I have delighted in immensely.

Fortunately, I had the luxury of completing graduate school and my dissertation as a single person; if I had had a husband and children first, I may never have been able to find the time to finish. (I know at least two women in different fields, who remain to this day ABD because the children took precedence over their academic career, and for them this was perhaps an unquestionable choice. For me, the lack of closure would have been heartbreaking.) Yet as an adjunct instructor, I have found that I earn a relatively high hourly rate, even with preparation and grading time figured in. I have the flexibility to occasionally volunteer in my children's schools or go on fieldtrips with their classes. I have served on the steering committee and as an officer in a parent organization for gifted children in our large urban school district. I have chaired PTA committees that I have taken a personal interest in, such as arts events, language clubs, and book fairs. I haven't felt anguished about taking off early for a sick child when necessary, or, in contrast, I have felt supported at home by staying to teach because I have a partner who works nights and can be there in the daytime to watch the kids. Moreover, adjunct professors aren't required to serve on committees or attend departmental meetings (although we still appreciate being asked and gladly do so whenever possible). Don't get me wrong: Working as an adjunct can make you feel like a second-class citizen. Still, most full-time colleagues with integrity will treat you like you're one of them, and most students don't care at all about your status, as long as you're a good teacher.

On the job and at home, if you're able to survive those early years of infancy, toddlerhood and preschool, you can almost certainly weather the storms of elementary and middle school. When my first son was a newborn, I remember driving 30 minutes to my half-day job teaching first-year German at a high school in an adjacent county, and having the secretary notice baby spit-up on my flowing silk blouse. At that same job, I also locked myself in the restroom to hand pump breast milk during my lunch hour to save for him. I remember standing at the door to my younger son's preschool classroom, while he, at age three, stood crying because I was leaving to go teach. The transition from the toddler room was hard for him, and separation anxiety was rearing its ugly head. For the same child, I got a speeding ticket for rushing home from a college campus in the neighboring county, because he needed to be picked up early for an ear infection. A few years before, I'd had another ticket for speeding with a state trooper behind me, all the while oblivious to the cruiser's lights because I had a screaming baby in the car seat. Those days of early childhood can be trying for even the most natural of mothers. And I do not count myself among them.

Today, with some perspective on parenting, I look into the faces of women with babies, toddlers, and preschoolers in hand, at my younger son's school, on the playground, and in the grocery store. I often see fatigue and a lack of joy at this most difficult of jobs. For me, the answer to this dilemma was working part time. Young mothers yearn for adult conversation, and college teaching provides that (if college students can be considered adults!). Keeping your fingers in the professional pie so to speak also has great advantages for your ego and your vita. You can play an important role in an academic setting and institution of higher learning and thus avoid large gaps

in your resume. (Not that staying home full time with the kids during the early years doesn't have its own set of benefits; that would simply have been too demanding for me personally.) Earning your own income is vital too, while teaching and keeping active in research are essential for remaining intellectually engaged with others in the field.

Although in the teaching arena I feel successful despite my adjunct status, in my scholarly work I have had a mixture of accomplishments and disappointments. Presenting papers has been sporadic, yet fulfilling. I have attended and participated in conferences in German and women's studies, 20<sup>th</sup> Century literature, foreign language symposiums, and, of course, and gratefully, Women in German. Ironically, I had a paper accepted at the MLA Convention in New York City in 1992, but since my first child was born 3½ weeks prematurely, a friend and former colleague from graduate school, Ann Rider, was kind enough to step in and read it in my place.

Publishing has been trickier. Smaller tasks such as book reviews, encyclopedia entries, and short essays have been manageable. Larger projects still beckon from the horizon. While holding a one-year position immediately upon receiving my doctorate, I was solicited for the publication of my dissertation and entered a contract to that end, which occurred the same year my first child was born. After several years of intermittent but diligent work preparing the manuscript—usually during the summer when I struggled to afford part-time childcare, with little or no paycheck myself yet without the demands of teaching—I was finally ready to submit a camera-ready copy. I had also paid a typist to help me format and prepare the text. In the meantime, a number of years had passed. The authors in my study had continued to publish, but as the mother of young children, I hadn't had the time or the luxury to spend in my study or



at the library updating the research. In the weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, I received an angry and reproachful letter from the editor of the series in which my book was to be published, no doubt justifiably yet hurtfully rejecting the manuscript as outdated and insufficient. What did I do? I acquiesced. The book was never published. That defeat seemed to dim in light of the tragedy suffered by our country. Beyond that, at that point I didn't have the time or the desire to update my findings. Only recently have I again looked into the newer publications by the authors who sparked my interest during those years of dissertation and post-graduate work. Perhaps something will yet grow from that seed.

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