

***Mother's Day***  
**By Julie Shayne**  
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In 2000 my husband and I left the west coast for my excellent job in the Southeast. Neither of us wanted to leave but my career took priority. Every year on Mother's Day my mom and step-dad would travel from the Northwest to the Southeast so we could spend five rushed days together. And every year I went to my university's honors graduation. I was always quite thrilled to see my brilliant women students graduate and wish their mothers happy Mother's Day but it never stopped angering me that I could not be with my own mother and daughter. On Mother's Day 2006 all that changed; I resigned from my job and my husband and two children moved to the Northwest. I had no job waiting for me just some good contacts and faith that this decision will work out.

As a native Californian I never imagined myself living in the South. As it turned out, the only job offer I got out of grad school was at one of the three southern universities I applied. My now husband picked up his life from the Bay Area and followed me to the other end of the political and cultural world. We always thought it would be temporary. We thought I'd get tenure and then I would just find that perfect job on the west coast. I applied to a few jobs and we fantasized about leaving. In the mean time, we got married, bought a house, had a daughter, made many friends, and visited the west coast every chance we got.

My daughter was born two years after I started my job and I was granted maternity leave and the option to stop the tenure clock. I did stop it but not without much consideration. Many senior faculty, typically moms, advised me not to stop it as reviewers expect one year extra of work. Others assured me that was not the case; you remind them you had a kid, and everyone understands ebbs and flows in productivity. In retrospect, I am pretty sure the moms were correct. For example, the first thing that goes when one has a new baby is conference presentations. When I got my post-partum review I was told I needed to present more papers at conferences. Observations like this made me feel extra pressured to prove myself at my pre-tenure review.

So I finished my first book. This meant I spent the first fourteen months of my daughter's life writing a book. I was so obsessed that her first word was "book." As soon as my leave ended I was working fourteen hour days, seven days a week. My husband did everything for my daughter except for nursing. He fed her, took her to daycare, bathed her, etc. The days I worked on campus I left the house before she even woke up. I tried very hard to pick her up from daycare because it was one of the highpoints of the day even if I had to immediately hand her to my husband once we got home. I am grateful I have a husband and she a father who supported me in my efforts though it killed me when I would hear them giggle through the walls and I was stuck at my computer. But I had to pass that review if I wanted to go up for tenure so I just kept working. I had to get tenure to get a job on the west coast. I missed my daughter like crazy and we were living in the same house. I did however pass my review and received much kudos for having a book so early in my career.

After flirting with jobs on the west coast it started to become clear that this was not going to happen. I would not find a job as great as mine in the area we wanted to live and I wasn't willing to compromise my career. My husband was miserable. I felt guilty and I missed my family as well. Every time my mother had to say goodbye to my daughter at the airport I cried. It killed me to watch my daughter and mother have to remake their relationship over and over and yet again have to say goodbye. It never got easier, only harder. We talked often about me just quitting my job and trying to teach at a community college. But how could I just throw away all of my hard

work? What would people think? Why did I even bother going to graduate school if I am not even going to have a real job? My husband and I would go back and forth and I would get close to saying, “ok, I quit,” but then the thought of ruining my career scared me back onto the tenure track. Not to mention the message from my colleagues and mentors that deprioritizing my career isn’t even an option.

On Mother’s Day 2005 I found out I was pregnant again. Like all Mother’s Days, I had been at the honors graduation while my mom and daughter waited at home for me. We found out that evening which proved a pretty spectacular Mother’s Day gift. I went on sabbatical and maternity leave for a year at which point we got ourselves back to the west coast for what we thought was a temporary and rejuvenating stay. While pregnant I worked furiously on my second book right up until the day before my son was born. After his birth, long before I was getting any real sleep, I resumed writing. I was writing my maternity leave away, getting increasingly frustrated and depressed that rather than spend those precious early months with my son I was worrying about tenure. I loved both my job and writing but I also love being a mother and knew that my son is the last baby I will ever have and those early months are an amazing time. The stress from work, the frustration of not getting to spend time with my son, the post-partum hormones, and sleep deprivation merged to create a mild case of post-partum depression.

Mother’s Day was approaching. It was going to be a special one because my mother and I could be together with our husbands and my two children and it required no more than a six-minute drive. But it was also going to be the last Mother’s Day we would have like that because just a few months later my family and I were heading back to my great job, in a place we did not want to live, with our families nowhere in sight. But what choice did we have? I did not go through graduate school for nothing, right?

Then it occurred to me: Why would quitting an excellent job mean graduate school was a waste? When I decided to be a professor did I mean only at an elite university? Did I intend to live some place I did not want to, just for a job? It is after all, just a job, right? No, it is much more. As many of us know, being a feminist academic feels like more than just a job. We see ourselves charting new intellectual territory: writing women into history, discovering new ways to learn and teach, filling the universities with women faculty and thus role models for girls, and creating a reality where GE requirements include Women Studies, Western Civ, and English Composition. How could I abandon that agenda? How could I contribute to accomplishing these goals if I did not have a prestigious position? What message would I send girl students, and worse yet my own kids, if I just up and quit and put motherhood first? What sort of intellectual and emotional cataclysm takes place in feminist academics that makes us feel guilty, to feel like a failure if we let our families take priority over our careers? These questions spiraled in my head since the moment my daughter was born. I remember telling one of my grad school mentors that I couldn’t stand having my daughter so far from my mother and I wanted to quit and he convinced me that was not an option. Similarly, I remember telling a senior colleague, also a mother, that we were miserable away from the west coast and our families and I wanted to quit; she said “you can learn to be happy anywhere.” She might be right but why should we have to?

So, despite all of these intense messages that my career should come first I finally decided I can not live like that anymore. Just before Mother’s Day 2006 I called my dean and both of my chairs and told them I was leaving my job. All three were incredibly kind and supportive. Academics understand being separated from their families, living somewhere they never imagined they would. Many academics do not even live fulltime in the same cities or states as their spouses. Academics are mentored to put our jobs first. We are taught that temporary or community college positions are not real jobs. I decided not to follow these guidelines any more. I cannot put my career first nor can I stop working entirely. I love feeling like I am a part of

something important for girls and women. I love teaching. I love watching youngish girls learn things they would not have learned if Women Studies did not exist. I love that my daughter pretends to write books and thinks everyone is her mommy's student. I love that she knows I am a professor. I have not given up on my career, but as one colleague (a mother) said, I have just taken it in a new direction.

[The first version of this essay was written in October 2006]

**Author's bio:** Julie Shayne was an Assistant Professor of Women Studies and Sociology at Emory University. She resigned in May 2006 and is now a Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences and the Center for University Studies and Programs at the University of Washington, Bothell and affiliated faculty with Women Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. She is the author of *They Used to Call Us Witches: Chilean Exiles, Culture, and Feminism* (Lexington Books, 2009) and *The Revolution Question: Feminisms in El Salvador, Chile, and Cuba* (Rutgers University Press, 2004). She lives with her husband, two children, and dog in the Seattle area.