

For working moms, 'balance' is a lie

By Maria Wiering

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The afternoon I returned to work after maternity leave was a blur. I made the mistake of taking my 3-month-old grocery shopping that morning, which took too long and pushed him past his limit, resulting in a wailing boy that took a while to soothe once home. In a rush, I scarfed down scalding canned soup, tossed a notebook into my bag, and threw on a skirt and sweater.

"You look nice," my husband said, probably because it was a change from my ubiquitous yoga pants.

"Thanks," I said, and quickly kissed him goodbye.

I was halfway to work before I realized I hadn't kissed my baby.

Enter mom-guilt.

This New Year really does carry with it the promise of a "new me" – the working mom version. Catholic mom blogs like to buzz about whether moms of little ones should work at all, but for me, not supplying a paycheck wasn't an option. Also, I like my work. A lot.

But I also like being a mom. A lot. This begs the million-dollar question: Can a girl like me have it all?

That query has garnered a significant amount of attention in recent years, largely spurred by Anne-Marie Slaughter's 2012 Atlantic piece on the topic. The general consensus seems to be that, in this day and age, a woman should be able to "have it all" – typically meaning a great career, marriage and children – but that various workplace policies or cultures are the culprits when a woman struggles to do so.

A lot of people actively engaged in this kind of conversation are deluding themselves with this idea of "balance." It can't exist.

Baylor University associate professor Elizabeth Corey may have come closer to reality with her October 2013 First Things piece, "No Happy Harmony," where she argued that the question is not one of flexible hours, supportive coworkers or personal organization. The core of this issue is spiritual, she wrote, and therefore plays out in the soul.

The aspirations of work and family are more like a tug of war – a career pulls a woman on a quest for achievement, while mothering demands that a woman sacrifice self. To surrender to either of these poles means shutting the door to an authentic and good desire, so most women find themselves where I am – living in the real but vexing tension of work and family life.

For a Christian, however, this kind of tension should be familiar. We're told to live in the world, but not be of the world – that we are simply pilgrims making our way. The best measure of how successfully I manage that tension will not be by what I accomplish, but rather my motivation. Is it pride that drives me to want to be the best journalist, or the best mother? Or is it service to God? If I am where I discern God wants me to be, I can only do my best, albeit imperfectly, to do his will. And to remember, especially in times of stress and distraction, always to kiss the baby.

Maria Wiering is a staff writer for the Catholic Review.

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