

Momifesto

Affirmations for the Academic Mother

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As graduate students in a rigorous PhD program, we often marveled at the professors raising young children amid the intense demands of academia. Such conversations took place in private, however, as anything outside of publishing and landing a job was considered frivolous for serious doctoral candidates. We all had babies within the first few years of joining faculties (at a state college, a community college, a private university, and a state university, respectively) and found that sharing our unsettling Dr. Mom experiences in phone conversations, e-mails, or the occasional meeting helped us to process the multifaceted challenges faced by the academic mother.¹ The medieval structures and traditionally juvenile attitudes toward women in the higher education system have not been completely dislodged; they just appear in more covert but equally insidious ways. Motherhood is constructed as All Body—our own and/or our baby’s—while scholarly work is rendered All Mind. This is an impossible theoretical dialectic to negotiate, and establishing realistic expectations is crucial for anyone considering (or reflecting upon) maternity in light of myriad obstacles erected by academic culture. We hope the following list might be useful in that regard.

Ten Things We Wish Someone Had Told Us

1. You are strong enough to handle any disturbing assumption regarding maternity before, during, and after your pregnancy—know that it reveals more about the system than it does about you.

1. We are not claiming that it is more difficult in our field than in anyone else’s. Also, we focus on our experiences as married, heterosexual, biological mothers here, but fathers—as well as adoptive, single, same-sex, step-, and foster parents—also face the stress of sleep deprivation, the work of balancing a new family dynamic with existing job duties, the inevitable financial tangles, the need for institutional compassion, et cetera.

The notions that only an unorganized person would get knocked up and that pregnancy makes women irrational and impossible to deal with are fostered by the higher education system, which is often hostile to feminism and is decidedly antiparent (there is no day care on my campus, for example, and hysterical laughter at the very thought). The default assumption seems to be that faculty members have wives at home who take care of distractions like reproduction. On my campus, suggestions for family-friendly practices such as paid parental leave, designated private nursing areas, day care, and health-care coverage for infertility issues are dismissed out of hand as unnecessary. Which brings me to the whopper: birth or miscarriage is to be scheduled at the convenience of the school, preferably on holidays. You may not want to tell your department chair you are expecting until after the second or third ultrasound, as going back and revealing a miscarriage can be both nerve-racking and violating. I learned this the hard way.²

People may assume all you want to talk about (or are capable of talking about) is your child. In meeting after meeting, the dean would ask other colleagues about their writing projects while she just asked me, “How’s the baby?” I felt like she assumed that I was no longer in the same professional realm; I was (only) a mother.

To some onlookers, I waited too long to have children and now am reaping the appropriate punishment for that selfishness (three miscarriages so far). The most vocal detractor has been a sister-in-law who so much as said that maybe this was God’s way of saying I shouldn’t have another child because I can’t handle what I have. When I was pregnant at thirty-three and had gained more than the ideal amount of weight, a doctor told me that my body would have a harder time snapping back and that *this* is what I got for putting my career before my fertility. Thus, according to the larger culture, I am of “advanced maternal age,” too old to be trying to have more babies.³

2. Anything beyond a so-called normal pregnancy elevates the intensity of what is already an emotionally and physically complex time. Among the four of us, there were several pregnancy losses, symphysis, and preeclampsia necessitating bed rest (and postdelivery: postpartum depression, a broken tailbone, reconstruction of the pelvic floor, and hyperlactation). Online forums specific to the problem, and therapy, proved to be extremely useful resources in these cases.

3. We all finished the PhD before having children and went through our pregnancies at what was labeled “advanced maternal age.” The resulting treatment and testing, while important, can be stressful—especially given the reams of pregnancy literature that figures the older mother as a creaky, failing machine who, if struck by complications, should just consider herself lucky that she was able to get pregnant in the first place.

Meanwhile, in my department, I am considered a *young* professor—and *motherhood* is viewed as a code word for “occupational interference.”



When I told my chair that I was pregnant, the response was, “You do know how that happens, don’t you?” While I was reeling from that, he said, “Oh, I thought you were going to tell me that you’d gotten a job at Cornell”—so I felt troublesome in having become pregnant and also less acceptable for only having become pregnant, rather than landing a prestigious job.



2. You are maternally beautiful, even if you feel more like a spectacle than at any other time in your life.

Your expectant body will be inscribed by colleagues, students, friends, and family. Those notations may seem disparaging or embarrassing even when they probably aren’t.

It was difficult not to feel self-conscious standing in front of classes with my belly bursting out of whatever ridiculous ensemble I’d created in an earnest effort to look polished (“Do you think they’d notice I’m enormous if I add this scarf?”). Simply acquiring a professional maternity wardrobe can be hard on a junior faculty or adjunct salary; you might try eBay, where postpartum women often sell gently used work clothes in lots, and baby-oriented consignment stores.

You may be shocked at how pregnancy can pull everyone’s attention to your body. My pregnant waddle and growing belly prompted unsolicited commentaries: some good-natured, some funny, but all rather unnerving. (And imagine the awkwardness of interviewing for a new faculty position while eight and a half months pregnant—talk about an elephant in the room!)



COLLEAGUE 1: “You are getting so big!”

COLLEAGUE 2: “It’s good, though, that you only have one chin. I never understood why pregnant women gain weight in their faces—the baby is in their stomach, for goodness’ sake!”



3. You do not have to hide the physical tolls connected to motherhood.

Both before and immediately after the baby’s arrival, concentrating on anything more taxing than watching popsicles melt can be a major endeavor.

Trying to facilitate a sophisticated class discussion while battling severe sleep deprivation, as well as the mommy fog evinced by the odd disappearance of available words in your brain, is not for the fainthearted. (I was up front about the maternal haze, and my students were completely understanding and patient when I'd momentarily forget easy words like *metaphor* or *endnote*.) Know that this situation is temporary and will be resolved when pregnancy hormones subside and your child begins to sleep through the night.

Teaching with pregnancy maladies (i.e., stabbing backache, burning, tender feet, overpowering nausea or heartburn, etc.) is disconcerting, to say the least.⁴ Your body may seem not only fragile but also unreliable: Will I throw up in front of my students? Will I faint? Will the baby ever stop kicking my lungs so I can breathe again? If anything does happen, you can't control it and it is not your fault, so try not to worry about it.

You can request accommodations, but receiving them may take resolve. I qualified for temporary disability privileges but was given unsuitable classrooms at the far end of campus and had to organize a room swap on my own; I also had to obtain a Department of Motor Vehicles handicapped tag before I was allowed to park anywhere near my office or where I was teaching.



I gave birth to my first child during the last week of classes, so I had hundreds of essays, exams, and videotaped oral presentations to be graded within two weeks while dealing with a newborn, breastfeeding, and recovering from birth. When my second child was due in the summer, faculty members commented on how well I'd "timed things."



4. You may have more options for maternity leave than it appears.

No one in your college may seem to know, or to care, how maternity leave actually works. Even though I had applied formally for leave and had made a million calls during the preceding nine months, I was on the phone with a human resources representative the morning after giving birth, begging her to put the arrangements in writing so that my doctor,

4. For morning sickness, we recommend cinnamon gum, ginger ale, hard candy, and motion sickness wristbands. If all else fails, your doctor can actually prescribe anti-nausea medication (do not underestimate the benefits of the latter even if you don't like to medicate—it can really take the edge off). And since it is worse when you are tired—naps, naps, naps.

my chair, and my dean were all on the same page. It would be a good idea to secure such a letter before going to the hospital.

Currently, you are federally entitled to twelve weeks of (unpaid) leave by the Family and Medical Leave Act, during which they cannot fire you. Your college may also offer paid maternity leave (typically six weeks for vaginal delivery and eight weeks for caesarean, though it will vary), but paid and unpaid leave will run concurrently, so twelve weeks of leave is all that you are guaranteed.⁵

Inquire about substitute possibilities: babies—how shocking!—have been known to arrive during a term. I was told that I had to take the whole semester off if I took any leave at all, which was both financially impossible and untrue; I later heard about a dean's fund for partial-semester-replacement faculty. I did not take leave, which is most strenuously *not* recommended.

Stay on the good side of your department chair, who can make life as easy or as difficult as she or he likes—and know your human resources contact person, as she or he will be able to reign in an out-of-control chair if it comes to that.

Be prepared: no matter how much leave you are allowed, it will feel entirely insufficient, even though your college may act as though they are doing you a great favor by granting you *any* leave in the first place. *Nota bene*: there are some countries where paid maternity leave can be between one and two years in duration. Fight for as much as you can get.



My chair said, "You won't breastfeed in the classroom, will you?" I was so horrified by the idea that I just stammered and backed out of the room.



5. You have the right to breastfeed.

Since motherhood is not supposed to have an impact on your job performance, no one takes it into account when scheduling long events. Ergo, committees do not care if you need a break for your lactating body. (Unless, of course, you are shooting milk across the room. In that case, they care very much for you to Go Away and Deal with Yourself, as you've just made an exhibition of the exact thing everyone has agreed not to mention.)

5. If you experience complications during birth and your doctor requires that you have more healing time, your college may approve an extended leave.

You might want to request that your classes aren't scheduled back to back. Often while I was teaching, my breasts would become progressively more engorged: painfully hard, burning hot, and visibly leaky. And someone would always knock on my office door when I was pumping, desperate to fill the bottle so I could achieve two hours of sleep in a row that night. Of course, it was pointed out to me that my door was closed too much: "We want to let students know that we're available."

You will quickly learn the value of a private space. The door to my office would not lock, and occasionally a student or a colleague would barge in as I sat at my desk like a dairy cow. A sign declaring "breast pumping in progress" would have been the obvious solution, but I could never make myself display it.



I was informed that, because of staffing shortages, I should be able to return to work full speed ahead within two weeks of my C-section. As it happened, I miscarried and had a D and C over spring break. I never missed a day of work.



6. You can be dedicated both to your profession and to your family despite those in your department, college, and universe who act as if you can only devote yourself to one or the other.

Some colleagues will be surprisingly supportive while others will be irritated, embarrassed, or both by anything having to do with your being "in the family way." Individuals without children are likely to be your greatest detractors and to see any accommodations for parenting as preferential treatment.

Scheduling our own hours is an invaluable benefit of our positions (the other day-care moms envy me). However, I must toil through all of the "breaks"—and, often, between midnight and 5:00 A.M.—to complete my work. It's impossible to do anything on the computer when the kids are awake; I may miss an entire departmental debate that takes place via e-mail, appearing undedicated to some because I don't immediately contribute outside of standard working hours.

You may confront mommy tracking. On my first day back from leave, a professor beckoned me over and said, conspiratorially, "The reappointment committee agreed that you really need to be working on a book, *if you are at all interested in tenure*," the application for which was years in the

future (as if I had wandered off into the wilds of motherhood and no one trusted my desire or ability to fulfill any other obligations).



When I requested classes that ended by 5:30 P.M., so I could make it to day care before they closed, my chair, obviously annoyed, said “I’ll try, but don’t expect us to keep doing that for you until your kids go to kindergarten or anything.”



7. Your identities and behaviors may become über-fragmented, and that is, though complicated, perfectly acceptable.

One role slides into the space carved out for the other, like when I’m playing Buzz Lightyear with my son and thinking about how to introduce postmodernism in my lecture, or when a project goes something like this: start writing, give a bottle, return to writing, find a toy, write a little, change a diaper, write more, give a hug, and—then—finish the sentence I started an hour ago.

Once I took our baby (who had a small fever and couldn’t go to day care) to school until my husband could pick him up. While my students toiled over their midterms, my son babbled, cooed, squealed, and noisily hurled every toy I handed him onto the floor. I finally resorted to pacing in the corridor, watching the class through the window in the door, until the exam was over. I’ve also tried to attend meetings with a baby on my arm, and the rule of nature seems to be that the more hushed and still the rest of the room is, the louder and more wiggly the baby inevitably becomes.

I used to be a morning person, teaching very early courses and accomplishing more by 10:00 A.M. than many people do all day. Now I barely screech into work by that time; just after the click of the car-seat buckle, I am likely to hear “I pooped,” which takes us back inside to all the temptations that made it so hard to get out the door the first time.



Once when I was particularly upset by a rough morning and day care drop-off, a colleague-mother said to me, “At our family reunion, my boys talked and talked about how deserted they felt when I sent them to preschool. You see, it stays with them forever.”



8. Your decision to utilize day care is not shameful.

I often feel at odds with mothers in the department who stayed home to raise their children and then pursued careers later in life. You can't win with them: you're a bad worker for leaving campus early to get to your kids, but you're a bad mom for leaving your kids in (gasp) day care. It also seems strange that those who had to break through the gender hierarchy now punish younger versions of themselves, as if they resent that we have methods—albeit not perfect—for tackling career and family simultaneously. Obviously, they don't look behind the curtain at the tremendous physical and emotional tolls involved.

The only advice, such as it was, I received from an older female faculty member was that I better get used to leaving my child in day care for gradually longer periods of time if I ever wanted to be academically successful—definitely not what I wanted to hear during my first guilt-filled week back from maternity leave.

My female colleagues with grown children offered much-appreciated empathy. One even told me how, in the 1970s, she placed her baby in a crib in the corner of her classroom and office—and while I think that's wonderful, it is not an option at my school. I worry that teaching despite the fact that my paycheck barely covers the cost of day care prioritizes the desire for a career over the well-being of my children. Yet I also worry that staying at home would be self-centric, given the sacrifices my family and I made in order for me to get a PhD in the first place. Someone suggested that continuing to work outside the home is actually investing in a better future for my family, but it's hard to believe that in the daily chaos.



People kept saying: “X was a professor, then had a baby and decided to leave because it was too much work,” and “If you decide not to come back after your maternity leave, we would understand.” I was never sure if that meant they wanted me to leave or to stay.



9. You do not have to pretend that it is easy to be both professor and mother.

It's hard not to feel guilty that you are not doing the research and writing projects you planned to do; that you *are* doing the research and writing projects you planned to do; that you can no longer spend the entire weekend prepping and grading; that you do sometimes spend the entire weekend

prepping and grading; that you are no longer as available for school events; that you are not available enough for family events; that you are happy in the maternal sphere; that you are happy in the career world; that you are exhausted from all the happiness.

I always smile and shrug when people ask me how I manage both roles. Most of the time I feel like a failure on both fronts.

Expect the inevitable clash of schedules, and know that reasonable people will work with you when these occur (early morning meetings or evening departmental activities can be particularly difficult for parents, adding more chaos to the daily pandemonium). If you are lucky enough to be in a department where a majority of the faculty members has children, you may find that meetings usually end by 5:00 P.M. so that everyone can race to the day-care provider or after-school activity; if not, then you will need to regularly remind your colleagues that you have scheduling constraints.



I heard through the grapevine that one of my colleagues said, about me: “How can she apply for tenure if she’s pregnant?”



10. You can promote motherhood professionally—and it is a political statement.

Motherhood is an ongoing subject in my formal projects, ranging from my papers on maternal representations in literature to my poems, all of which I document as part of my professional development requirement.

As cochairs of a recent women’s caucus conference panel, we selected the topic of motherhood in art and popular culture. After receiving so many proposals that it was possible to create three panels (a historical first, we were told, demonstrating the interest in the subject), we received a complaint that caucus members felt excluded by the topic (even though the focus was on critical interpretations, not mothering). Interestingly, the Q&A following the panel on motherhood in film *did* turn into a passionate dialogue about how mothers have been marginalized, even punished, in various ways in the academic realm.

Before I came back to work after having my first child, I was terrified I’d seem soft—even that I’d accidentally refer to myself as “Mommy” in front of my students—and I wanted to be seen as a professional again. The longer I’ve been balancing both worlds, the less afraid I am of blending the two.



Bonus Item: Kindnesses will find their way to you.

Since my baby was due mid-term and I could not afford to take maternity leave, my chair agreed to my proposal that I teach online and weekend classes in lieu of a regular on-campus schedule. Then several of my colleagues cheerfully agreed to cover one Saturday class each, so that I could have some healing time at home.

An adjunct at my school brought me all her son's hand-me-downs when my child was born.

I discovered, in my office, an adorable gift for the baby, with a card from the whole department.

A colleague has repeatedly watched my son while I sat in on meetings for which I couldn't find day care.

Many people seemed supportive of my pregnancies as well as eager to hear news once my children arrived.



We wouldn't trade parenting for anything; however, we are consistently surprised by our determination to stay in the academic game when we receive numerous messages that motherhood is unwelcome. Although an intricate juggling act is required, teaching and mothering can complement each other on many levels. You may find, for example, that maternity leads to an ability to *hyper*-multitask, and the skills from your academic training will be useful in mastering new maternal discourse—for example, “swaddle,” “colic,” “solids.” (You've made it when you hear, “There's a snake in my boot,” or “Swiper, no swiping!” and you *get* it.)

With the help of projects like this one, we hope to make life a little easier for the academic mothers to come (which requires reconfiguring the entire patriarchal power regime, but that is a topic for another essay). In sum, we recommend knowing your rights, anticipating challenges, drawing appropriate boundaries, and holding your head up—mothering is crucial to the existence of the species, after all. You are doing incredibly important work that should be celebrated more explicitly in *and* out of academe.