

An All-Too Familiar Balancing Act

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These were my goals during later high school and throughout college at Northwestern:

- Do work that I love
- Be self-sufficient
- Have a child by the time I'm 35

I never questioned the ability to achieve these goals.

These were my realizations in my mid-20s while living the starving actor life in Chicago:

- I don't love acting enough—and I miss academia
- It's hard to be self-sufficient as an actor
- I'd still like to have a child by the time I'm 35 but don't really care if I'm married

I changed my action plan and went to graduate school in performance studies—same goals, different context.

Three gender-related moments stand out to me from the master's program at Emerson College, moments that I did not recognize initially as connected to my identity as a woman:

1987 First semester—I was thrown into teaching the speech sections of the large public speaking course—and I learned that I loved teaching! A revelation. One of my classmates, also a first-time TA, also small, early 20s, and female, had a difficult time relating to her students. “I need to be taken seriously!” she proclaimed. “I need to be an authority figure but they have no respect for me and challenge everything I say—and it's because I'm young and female.” Hm, no, I remember thinking to myself. It's because you're trying too hard and you're not comfortable in your own skin, and the students are picking up on that discomfort. I remember being quite sure of myself as I compared the two of us, acknowledging that sexism is the source of much injustice in the world but not in this case. I kept these thoughts to myself, however, because I didn't think my classmate would listen to me. Reflecting back, I was awfully judgmental. And, there were no young male TAs in that first year with whom to compare experiences.

Second year—my performance studies solo recital piece was a compiled script exploring the character of Cleopatra as portrayed in a variety of drama, fiction, and nonfiction. I was drawn to Cleopatra's story as a female leader but, as I think about it now, the analysis I explored through the performance hardly scratched the surface of her choices, her actions, and her responses to the men in her life. While at the time I did recognize that all the literary sources I used were written by men—and that some of the portrayals were clearly chauvinistic—I didn't highlight that quality in my performance. I chose instead to

look at style, language, tone—a literary approach that omitted the gendered overtones and reflected my education up to that moment. I chose to take ownership of Cleopatra by juxtaposing the multiple texts and disparate perspectives through my script; I reshaped Cleopatra and brought her to new life—in my voice and body. But those complex layers: historical larger-than-life woman; plays, prose fiction and biography written about her by men; re-constructed and performed by a woman—the real complexity of those layers escaped me at the time.

Also second year—this was the advice from my closest friend as we explored doctoral programs: “Don’t go to a Ph.D. program with a lot of older male professors—you want to avoid the good ol’ boy environment because they’ll either pick fights with female professors and you’ll get caught in the crossfire, or they’ll put obstacles in your way and you won’t be able to finish your dissertation.”

I had no clear image of a good ol’ boy but didn’t like the sound of it.

As luck would have it, in 1989 I met Fred Corey from Arizona State University who persuaded me that the ASU Communication Department’s new Ph.D. program would be a good fit: it had a focus on performance studies with interdisciplinary opportunities; it provided a unique chance to contribute directly to the evolution of the program, since I would be part of only the second cohort, and; as a new program aiming for a contemporary edge, there was no good ol’ boy network with which to contend. The department was a rich mix of smart, dedicated women and men—inspiring teachers, prolific researchers, and generous mentors, with strong gender diversity if not as much of any other kind. I had plenty of role models: Kristin Valentine, Fred Corey, Kathy Miller, Cheree Carlson, Judith Martin, Tom Nakayama, Amira de la Garza, Michael Hecht.

Five gender-related moments stand out to me from the doctoral program at ASU:

In my second or third year, Kristin Valentine asked me to devise and direct a performance piece for undergraduates exploring diversity in America. Only four students auditioned for this performance but, remarkably, all four were perfect: three were women—and by sheer coincidence one woman was black, one was white, one was Latina—and the lone male was white. The resulting script thus naturally and necessarily involved intersections of gender and race. We toured the piece to a few schools around Arizona, and I became more directly cognizant of how gender impacts individual lives.

Fred Corey suggested that I incorporate more feminist theory in my work. I told him I didn’t think I really needed feminist theory and didn’t see how it fit with my research on Deaf culture and American Sign Language. In my mind, I had never directly experienced sexism; I was raised to believe in equal opportunity for all, and; I had never felt blocked by any external force from doing something I wanted to do. Fred listened patiently, nodded with understanding, and then strongly suggested that I read some feminist theory.

So I did. And I learned far more deeply how fortunate I had been thus far in my life. The women of the 1960s, ‘70s and into the ‘80s had far more to fight both for and against

than I ever had, and I owed them my freedom to set goals and move through space however I so chose. My own mother was just a bit too old to jump on the women's movement bandwagon, and while she encouraged and assured me that nothing would stand in my way, her own efforts were always just a few steps behind.

In the graduate programs in which I found myself, my own efforts were consistently rewarded. After never feeling quite right in theatre, the doctoral program made me feel confident that I had found a profession in which I could thrive. Michael Hecht counseled us that we should all publish at least one peer-reviewed article before going on the job market. I published two—one from my master's thesis and a second that originated from a graduate seminar and became the seeds for my dissertation. The second was published in *Text and Performance Quarterly*, and Kristin Langellier, the editor who shepherded the piece through revisions, became another valued mentor.

During my graduate school years, every NCA convention was located in a city where I had friends or family with whom to stay and, thus, unlike many of my classmates, I didn't do much party-hopping. I didn't observe evening flirtations, womanizing, hook-ups of any kind, though I did hear stories. And I did notice far more diversity in gender, race, and age in the performance studies panels than in most other divisions. After presenting a paper at one convention, a 50ish male professor approached me and said my paper might work in a collection of essays he was editing and would I like to have it included. Of course I was honored. Would I like to see some information on the collection? He had it just down the hallway in his room. I followed him, entered the room, and stood awkwardly in the entryway. Please come in. I stepped in a few feet. He probably said something suggestive but I was not at all attuned to the message. After more awkwardness he gave me his card and told me to contact him, and I left the room with one of those instantaneous "duh" realizations that left me feeling vulnerable and annoyed with my own naiveté. I did contact him about the collection but did not hear back.

When my husband of three years left me a month before my dissertation defense because, among other things, I was "too career-focused," I learned that gender inequality can hit very personally, run very deep, and come from surprising sources. It was the first time that gender role expectation and prescription impacted my relationships and sense of self.

And yet my goals remained the same:

- Do work that I love
- Be self-sufficient
- Have a child by the time I'm 35

The tenure-track position I was offered at Villanova University in 1993 created a brand new start: a new region of the US; a new adventure in independence; a way to begin my 30s with a salary and benefits, and; the freedom to develop an undergraduate curriculum in performance studies. I felt alone but very lucky. Years later I discovered that my salary

offer was less than my male colleagues' and realized I had never learned how to negotiate a salary.

But while Villanova as a whole seemed dominated by priests and other men, the Communication Department boasted an equal number of men and women on the faculty as well as diversity in race, religion, and age—an overall vibrant and supportive environment in which we could work together to make things happen.

And so, in terms of my goals, at 30 I was doing work that I loved and I was self-sufficient. And I met and married a wonderful life partner. I felt confident in being able to balance teaching, research, service and a relationship. I had heard many stories about trailblazing academic women who either chose not to have children or had at the most only one child in order to achieve their career goals. But while I felt deep respect and was thankful for the women of the previous few generations, I believed that my path would be easier if/when I had a family because of their labor and what I'd learned from their stories. After all, I'd wait until tenure—or close to it, academia allows for flexible hours, and I wasn't alone. In addition, as an only child myself who was happy with her childhood, I assumed that having one child would be just fine with me.

Right on schedule, I had a baby at 35 and submitted my tenure dossier a couple of months later.

At the time, my university did not have a formal maternity leave policy, or a childcare facility. With the crucial assistance of my chair, I cobbled together a leave that allowed me to have a full semester at home with the baby. When I returned to teaching, when he was 5 months old, I created my own childcare system by hiring students to babysit on campus three days per week when I needed to be there. Three or four students passed him around during the day, he napped in dorm rooms or quiet spaces in the student union, I nursed him in my office between classes, and he knew more people on campus than I did. I felt like I was making it work, and being a parent was making me incredibly happy. But the reality that I had to *work* to make it work, and that I had to create my own systems, was not lost on me.

Now balancing teaching, research, service, a relationship, *and* parenting all felt quite wobbly. We did a lot of talking in our department about these challenges, and my NCA female friends and I commiserated about the inability to compartmentalize or have any work-life balance, our sleep deprived bodies, and increased understanding of the complexity of the labor of women. While women of earlier generations seemed to keep their gendered challenges invisible or at least private, some of my contemporaries built work-life challenges and the female academic parent into their research programs, drawing significant attention to how our work in Communication could be used to address this phenomenon.

When my son was about 18 months old I was struck deeply with the desire for a second child for the sole reason—and I know it sounds odd—that the love I felt for him was so intense that it needed to be spread out a bit. And, now in my later 30s, I was becoming

more aware of being responsible to my parents as they were getting older, with no siblings to help me; I didn't want my son to have this kind of sole responsibility. With the birth of my daughter, the challenges of teaching, research, service, relationship, and parenting changed exponentially. The years between 2000 and 2005 are a bit of a blur—no, a big blur; I managed to stay on top of teaching and parenting, and brought to fruition a couple of research projects that had been in process, but the rest hung on by a thread.

I had achieved those three original goals but had no time, energy, or imagination to craft new ones because every moment of every day was so full. Rather than chart my own route as I had tried to do previously, I merely rolled with whatever happened and tried to navigate as smoothly as possible any bumps along the way. Then, at the 2005 NCA convention, I was elected Vice-Chair Elect of the Performance Studies Division, a position I had not actively sought but was pleased to try. As planner for the following year I implemented a few new ideas and enjoyed deepening existing relationships and forging new ones with colleagues and doctoral students across the country. Being Vice-Chair made me realize that the five years of blur had left me trailing in the career trajectory I “should” have been following. I had not taken serious steps toward meriting promotion to full professor and, while I had edited a book and created and performed a solo show, and published about the show, the rest of my research program had become a bit static. I felt compelled to make up that five-year gap that so many other working mothers have experienced.

In 2007, as I was re-igniting a research program, I was approached to apply for the position of Editor of *Text and Performance Quarterly*. This invitation came as a surprise; I had always assumed that major journal editors were full professors further along in their careers than I was. In conversations with Kristin Langellier and Judith Hamera, two previous *TPQ* editors who had published my work and mentored me, I learned that they both took on the editorship much earlier in their careers than I had realized. They were encouraging and, since I knew that these opportunities do not come along frequently, I applied and was accepted, becoming Editor-Elect in 2008, beginning the work of processing manuscripts in 2009, and editing Volumes 30-32, 2010-2012.

Editing *TPQ* was a joyful challenge. Even though my own research took a backseat to others' efforts, working with others' writing energized my own. Even though my university counted the editorship as service and not as scholarship—and thus would not grant me a course reduction—I chose to accept the position because the labor and expertise that goes into editing a national journal *is* scholarship whether or not it is designated as such in one's promotion dossier. . . . Every issue of *TPQ* was like a new edited book; I had always enjoyed reading editors' introductions of journal issues and brought that tradition back consistently to *TPQ*. I constructed themes around most of the issues based on the accepted manuscripts that were taking shape, and deeply enjoyed this creative process. I aimed for each issue to feel whole—each piece linked in some way. I increased the international reach of the journal and tried both to clarify the place of performance studies within NCA and appeal to readers and authors in related disciplines. It's important to note here that if NCA had not initiated a stipend for journal editors, I never would have been able to take on the position. Our graduate program was able to

provide me with a graduate assistant for the Journal, and I used the NCA stipend to “buy” myself a course reduction and travel to additional international and domestic conferences to promote the Journal. The experience proved to me that the balancing act of teaching, research, service, relationship, and parenting *could* be achieved, if not able to be sustained indefinitely.

The perspective I gained about performance studies nationally and internationally as a result of editing *TPQ* led to organizing and running a national performance studies conference at Villanova in 2012, the first performance studies-focused gathering since the one that helped initiate me into the field in 1995. With a committee of colleagues from across the US, we brought 75 junior and senior faculty, doctoral students and a few individuals from outside academia together to engage in dialogue about our disciplinary challenges and direction within Communication. I could see that some of the assistant professors who participated left with the same kind of new or deeper sense of connection and belonging that I had experienced at the 1995 gathering. A one-year retrospective on the conference was published in 2013 in *TPQ* (by the new editor!). This is what NCA did for me: it gave me a home in performance studies and a way to bring people together and help them feel part of a key scholarly community.

At one point shortly after I’d moved to Philadelphia, a friend told me I would know I was “on my way” in academia when I made an enemy. That is a strong word. My friend seemed to relish conflict and confrontation! I did not. I did realize over the years, however, that speaking out, writing and acting upon anything for which one holds a strong position is going to result in professional disagreement, debate, possible anger, relational discord, and at times outright attacks. I now understand that this friend was trying to tell me that if people were disagreeing with me, then they were listening, and as long as people were listening, then I could be “on my way.”

I have experienced a varying sense of difference within numerous contexts over the last 20 years—I’m Jewish and work in a Catholic university, I’m hearing and studied Deafness and ASL poetry, I’m straight and have worked for LGBTQ rights, I’ve been the only white person in sight for weeks while studying performance in Jamaica—but I have not felt othered as a woman specifically, or personally, except when my first marriage ended. I sensed occasional prejudice during my experience as *TPQ* editor, but I’m fairly certain that it had less to do with being female and more to do with assumptions concerning the role of editor itself, a role that for some people results in knee-jerk expectations of bias, elitism, distance, judgment, power plays, etc. As editor I tried to break down and counter those assumptions to the best of my ability, but to some I suppose I was inherently “the enemy.”

Reflecting on these experiences as a woman in NCA highlights how fortunate I was in the way I was raised: My dad loved, and lived for, his work; my mom continues to show me how much is possible with enough tenacity and energy, and; while I did not grow up with much financial security, my parents supported me however they could. I was extremely fortunate to get a tenure-track position and to receive enough funding from the university to attend national and international conferences and develop relationships that

would provide opportunities for leadership positions. I don't think I have blazed any new trails as a woman in NCA but perhaps I have expanded some; I have worked across gender lines and am trying to be the best leader I can be, and hope that I'm providing a good example for the women who come after me.

I do work that I love. I'm self-sufficient. I had children at 35 and 38 — and now those two kids are in middle and high school. Time to set some new goals.