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Learning Stewardship

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It was sunny and warm in parts of Metro Detroit during the week of Cs, in April 2021. I called it "fake summer" in my notes. In the survey I completed on the first day of the conference, I wrote that my path that day included "trips to the front porch to see my four-year-old work on his little projects in the sun."

While I remarked on them often in my notes that week, finding those quiet, joyful moments was its own kind of work in a season filled with tasks to do and emotions to manage. The week of the conference was my children's spring break; it was also a magical quarantine week during which all the plans we had—to go to the zoo, to hang out at Grandma's house, to give Mom space to think and work and attend the conference—were canceled. I was thankful none of us were sick, but in those days of uncertain exposures, we just followed protocols, staying home while still getting as much "done" as possible. I worked while everyone else tried to stay busy; when I was done working, I tried to get them off their screens for "family time." They would want me when I couldn't get away from my computer and I would want them when they were zombie-faced in front of their own machines. We hunkered down that week, sometimes getting out for a short walk, but with mainly divergent intentions for how we would spend our time and attention. I wrote Wednesday evening, in my Documentarian survey,

> I took a nice long walk with my sister. It was almost 80 degrees … It felt amazing. I breathed. I had hoped to spend a lot more time outside, and I had hoped to also work on a puzzle or read a book with my 8-year-old, but everyone in the house had their own agenda today.

Beginning each day with hope to find family time at the end of it, I pushed through my teaching and advising work, I checked in to conference sessions, I texted friends, I coordinated upcoming events with my stepmom. And then, each evening, I would see what scraps of everyone's energy and attention, mine included, were left.

I remember a seasonal church stewardship campaign from my childhood. The campaign—complete with a banner that hung in the back of the church—focused on the theme *Time, Talent, and Treasures*: where tithing seems challenging, church members can also contribute through their time (volunteering in the nursery during services, serving as greeters) or through their talents (singing in the choir, cooking for a Lenten supper). I have often used the "time, talent, and treasures" mantra from this childhood memory to remind myself, in especially tight budget seasons of adulthood, that I might find, perhaps, other ways to give to my congregation and the local community. Over time, as I have become a little less strained financially, I have used the mantra to assess a balance in my community contributions, identifying when I have the capacity to give funds and where my *time* and *talents*, instead, are gifts to others.

Sorting stewardship out in the larger sphere of my work/life balance, however, is something I am still learning. And in the spring of 2021, my best-laid plans for preserving time for myself, my scholarship, and my family, were noticeably falling apart. Something about a shift from the 2020 lockdown state (all family, all the time) to a return to the regular pace of academic life (but at home) highlighted where there were cracks in my careful curation of distributed time, talent, and treasures. I could sense where sand was falling through the hourglass faster than I expected, where the supports I thought I had in place were weakening, and where I did not have my attention always on where it was most needed.

The "remote" academic year of 2020–21 had marked a significant change in my working and parenting time. In summer of 2020, I applied for and received a one-year stop on my tenure clock, not knowing what the school year would bring for my children. Would they even go back to school in person in the fall? How much time would we spend in quarantines? When would everything shut down again? I forged ahead through every day, because any afternoon email could bring the news that they'd be home for two weeks or more. Each day, I worked efficiently from nine to five as if we'd start a new quarantine in the evening. In the evening, I would spend as much time as possible with my kids because, for the first time as a mom, I didn't have to spend ten hours a week driving around Metro Detroit for work. I could enjoy being home with them—and not just in the home with them, *being with them.* Even though they were blessed with almost a

full school year *at school* with masks and all the protocols possible, I regularly had one or more of them out during grade-level quarantines for safety. Managing life across my school and their school—synchronous and asynchronous—was a new venture.

My attention to finally crafting a nine-to-five life twenty-one years into a teaching career was reflected in a very full day planner. This planner was no less full the week of CCCC 2021, though I had tried for months to preserve the long weekend as a kind of respite. In what used to be a regular year of attending the conference, I would prepare months in advance how best to pause class plans and schedule childcare. My time in some distant city would often be split between a couple sessions a day, meals with my friends, and long, rambling walks around that city. In this planned remote week, however, I crammed conference attendance into my regular work week. While I had tried to save time for the conference by writing "CCCC" in big letters in the center of the boxes in my planner, I was not able to hold that space. I was recruiting for two research studies, coding for another, and working on curriculum development with my colleagues. I was also taking a month-long professional development course and doing extra writing about my Cs experience for graduate credits to renew my high school teaching license. In my Wednesday Documentarian notes, I remarked that I was hopeful that the slightly extended online access would support my plan to "fit" the conference in. This possibility was necessary, because by Friday of that week, I was feeling the pressure of everything happening at once:

> Today I feel like the conference has to be an afterthought in my day, but I also want to be able to tick off my to-do list for work, family, and conference, and just let it all be just enough and manageable. No reason why this week should feel "extra" even though looking toward it, I felt like … ohhhh it's gonna be so much.

I had hoped for deep attending, for the conference experience to be more than something I was trying to cross off in my planner. And at moments, I managed it. Watching other *teachers* present, specifically, I learned about new reflective writing genres worth investigating, about practicum assignments worth trying, and about rethinking the ways some of the texts I have used in my undergraduate and graduate classes in the past might be more critically interrogated. I learned

about strategies for supporting graduate teaching assistants through the even more difficult teaching of this pandemic, and I listened to teachers who had to do work that year that I never did from my homebound dining room location: teaching in person, in masks, and helping other teachers teach this way.

On Friday of conference week, I reported a happy teacher moment:

> Read a paper from a first-year student in my intermediate comp class, and she's got direction for future research and a career in law supporting children. The energy is so cool. She got this from her OWN WORK in a gen ed comp class, in an online class, during a pandemic. Thrilling. And it has nothing to do with me. I just gave her feedback on her work and responded to all of her emails.

My workday included sitting at home in front of the computer for eight hours a day, doing laundry and housework at intervals to get up and move. This strategy allowed my already responsive work nature to reach peak performance. An email inquiry came in, I answered it. Student needed feedback? Done. Meeting requested? Sure, how's tomorrow? Responding to my students helped them move along and feel connected. This didn't make me somehow the best rhetcomp professor, though. It just meant I was responsive. What I wasn't doing was stewing over my research. I was collecting data, writing grant proposals, making plans, but not always processing the work I was doing—that processing was being mentally scheduled for some future imaginary time. Similarly, my newfound ability to regularly cook meals for my kids and help them with their homework didn't make me a better mom. A more responsive mom, yes, but sometimes one who, while she could check off the to-do list for the day, was not always good at attending. Spread the professor over two new preps and research and service and advising and she's not the best at any one thing; spread the mom over four kids and housework and meal planning and shopping and yard clean-up and bath time and bills, and something important might go by the wayside.

In a kickboxing class, I watched my teacher gently redirect newcomers to place their left foot in front instead of their right; I watched him lessen the tension of getting the moves "right" by sometimes being silly; I watched him adjust his plans in real time—"We're skipping number 3 today"—to better serve the group's momentum.

This responsiveness is something I both practice and am always trying to improve. It's something I learn just as much about teaching from watching other people teach as I do from practicing it myself, especially after two decades in education. Watching conference sessions, I listen to descriptions of member checking and collaboration in qualitative studies, researchers describing how they ensure they're most appropriately responsive to participants' contexts and contributions. During the conference week, the conference sessions I attended and the regular work of my days kept me humble. I was reminded of what I have always known: I am not the center of this teacher-mom life and forgetting that could have big consequences for how I spent my time.

A year of pandemic life alongside the continual changes of being a parent in a divorced family had stirred in me a constant readiness for everything to change or get bad. This potential energy meant learning how to provide a new kind of mental health support not just for myself but also for my children. For myself, I took to midday walks, learning how to step away from a research problem to ambulatory thinking, how to use the fresh air and movement to kick my brain up a notch when I could sense a low on the horizon. Sometimes the kids would come with me, and we would choose a short or long circuit around the neighborhood. In quarantine weeks, these walks were necessary medicine. We didn't have the stamina for weeks of solitude like we did at the beginning of the pandemic.

In my conference journal, I wrote on Thursday,

> Third walk in before the storms come. My second oldest child, who seems to be suffering from depression, wailed the entire time we were on the walk. Her sister was frustrated. I was tired. She has her fourth therapy session this evening, online. I don't know what to do.

In the springtime, my younger daughter seemed gripped by a despair that would begin in solitary hours in her room when she was transfixed by her tablet games. Sometimes, this despair was only noticeable because, when she was pulled away from that terrible, magical box, she would wail for an hour, inconsolable, never able to tell us what was wrong, only able to say, "I don't know." An easy answer was that too much screen time is bad for kids. There were scary answers too. Her sister and I thought we knew what little communication was happening in the bits of chat time she had, but what if we didn't? What if, when

the wailing manifested, it wasn't because of the brain jolt of rejoining the world after being transfixed by an alternate reality, but because of something worse *in* that world that I didn't know about? When I couldn't get her to talk, when her grandparents couldn't get her to talk, when her sister couldn't get her to talk, I knew all I could do was just hold her. I also knew that somehow, she needed to talk to someone. So, we began therapy, online—more time staring into screens.

She was so angry at me for a while, dutifully attending her meetings, but if I sat there with her, making me do all the talking while she said, on repeat, "I don't know." But when I stepped out of the room, and did laundry and washed dishes, while I could not hear *what* she was saying, I heard her talking—whole sentences! She hated it, but she did it. Every other week for months I held steadfast to the appointments; every other week she'd sigh—"dangit!"—and slump her shoulders when I reminded her she had an appointment coming in the afternoon. Then, privately, in early summer, in a moment of her deepest sadness, we shared a moment where I asked the right question. She let me in, and I understood what had been happening, and I held her and told her I love her no matter what and always.

While my daughter pushed through a season of therapy appointments, my youngest son, Moses, bided his time building a boat out of trash for one of my best friends, who he got to interact with during many of our weekly Zoom calls throughout the year. It was an inspiration that seized my son in spring, around the time of the conference, and I was happy to let him keep his preschool imagination busy with scraps of cardboard and toilet paper rolls. He intended to build an entire "scene" for our friend, and each week would cobble together designs while I supplied the essential skill of gluing. Hoping for an end to separated pandemic living, my friend and I had chatted about our families spending time together over the summer, about going fishing and playing games and sharing meals. My son's perseverance demonstrated the same hopeful spirit for connecting with others outside of our home.

During the conference week, when I missed my friend after several lapsed Zoom appointments, I found he filled my thoughts on those afternoon walks. On Thursday morning of the conference, I wrote in my journal,

> My walk was killer. Reached out to send uplifting words. Hate missing my friend. Learning how to distantly ride out stress

> and highs and lows and family life, while never being able to be nearby to lift each other up, to sense how it's going. That's hard.
>
> Meanwhile, birdsong in Rochester Hills is amazing this morning.

I'd push through missing him, returning to my computer to work, and when my son came home with new ideas about the boat, I'd remember again. Moses built the boat for months, and when my Zoom calls with my friend waned again in the summer, like they annually do, I found my son's persistence with construction admirable and heartbreaking. Every scrap held potential as he built the scene he dreamed of and waited for a day when my friend would come see it. He found things that wanted use and put them to use—a true steward of not only his time and talents but also the treasures of the kitchen recycling bin. Instead of building, I'd sometimes find myself just sitting and staring and wanting grown-up connection. My son was confident and patient; I was trying to learn to trust that people stick around.

It was a season of deepest anxiety that hoped for peace. One hurdle after another appeared: quarantine, family court, animals living in the walls of my house. In weekly summer research meetings, my team connected over Zoom, sharing our family challenges and offering support before shifting to sorting out our problems with analyzing interviews. I tired of having something new and crummy to share each week, but in the weeks we could share even some little triumph—about children, about coding—things felt a little more possible. And the persistent effort of the choice to push through therapy with my daughter meant that in August, I got to tell her, for lack of a better word, that for now, pending her ability to keep talking to me or to anyone about her feelings, she had "graduated," her therapist felt she could take a break.

My daughter was learning to express her anxieties; alongside her, I was learning to let other people handle their jobs and not try to do their work for them. The season had already been full of family life changes and many unknowns were on the horizon. I had found my divorced-mom fortitude for securing my children's time with me where they were doing well, happy, rested, clean, and getting good grades, choosing to no longer bend at someone else's whims. However, I had also exercised some notion that the lawyer I hired to help me do this securing needed my assistance not only in compiling information for my case but also in crafting the rhetoric to get the job done.

I often ignored that her award-winning expertise was at work beyond my sight. I would spin my wheels late into the night composing written rationales that never needed to be employed. When I finally let go and let her do her job, trusted her knowledge and intuition and experience, all was settled, more simply than I had expected.

When I put my attention into my actual job, and not into what others should be doing, or how they are doing it, I find a little more value in how I spend my time. I arrived at the conference week with significant concern about managing my writing schedule for the four days to follow. I noted in my conference journal that I was caught up on grading, had a few meetings with graduate students and colleagues, had to monitor consent and scheduling for an interview and focus group portion of the research team study, and had to work through final revisions on an article revise and resubmit, "revisions that become *more* every time I think I am close to being done." I worked to set myself up with confidence, writing,

> This will all get done. I realized recently I write things really big in my planner and that makes it look like they're bigger responsibilities than they are. Daunting, but then, I get through them. So not a bad strategy after all.

My oldest daughter, who is on the fifth revision or so of her legitimately good novel, and who is becoming the teenager version of herself, has remarked to me several times that the stuff I write about is wholly uninteresting to her. "You're cool, mom, but your work is so … boring." She smiles, standing over me—she grew four inches last summer—waiting for me to respond. "All that matters is that I love it," I tell her. When I am scrambling to get a project moving, though, I do not love it. My affection arises when I get over the hill of the rough outline and suddenly my reading and analysis makes sense, and I can move back and forth across a document weaving an argument, leaving myself notes for what to pick up later.

Wanting to "avoid feeling too spread out mentally" as I worked to manage a few collaborative projects during the conference week, I remarked in my survey that I wanted to make "a few small gains in each project." I also explained how happy I was to be working from my dining room at home and not "sitting on the floor of a large conference center to eat a carryout lunch … [n]o patterned blue carpet here." I didn't miss being in a conference hall—how would I have found the

time to effect the hyperasynchronous life I had been living for several months while away from my headquarters? Working from my dining room table, and not the conference floor, made making progress on multiple projects more possible. It is the location in each home of my adulthood in which I have coordinated my writing life. From this spot, I can keep writing and do everything else that is required of me.

Toggling[1] and the research hour[2] get me through the weeks. Sit down and work in the document in front of me and then shift over to another project and work on that one a bit. Clock the time and the writing develops. I wrote the first full draft of this Documentarian tale in eighteen sittings over three weeks while I also took the lead on a collaborative research article, wrote orientation plans and course syllabi, and composed recommendation letters upon recommendation letters. But twenty-one years into this teaching life, I am pleased to acknowledge that writing is the central part of my workday. I am a writer. I wrote in my post-conference survey,

> I love writing about teaching and learning—that's evident to me. I have joy in mentoring and advising. … I just want to do good work and be good to those I come into contact with.

What it often means to "do good work" and to "be good" to my students and colleagues is showing up and listening, saving time for someone and letting them talk through problem solving. As in our isolated, asynchronous conference week, in our work lives that year my colleagues and students and I often stewed alone in our own home/work spaces all over Metro Detroit. Any moment to come together to talk was good work in action. Any sentence or paragraph written was a job well done. I just had to show up to the day, and then the next one, and then the next one.

I find a kind of resilience and acceptance persists across my writing life, letting a manuscript go to readers, trying again, sometimes waiting for years for its publication. This resilience and acceptance are both

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1. In an interview with Christine E. Tulley in Tulley's *How Writing Faculty Write: Strategies for Process, Product, and Productivity* (2018), Dànielle DeVoss says, "I have usually fifteen, sixteen apps open on my computer, and I just toggle all day" (p. 51). Since I read that sentence, I can't forget it.

2. I am indebted to my mentor Ellen Barton for impressing upon me the importance of identifying my research hour (and my goals for that hour) and keeping that writing time each day.

evident in this final note in my journal for the week, a reflection on my book project:

> I think it's not untidy. Just have to be persistent. Things will look a lot different next year. I will have more to say.

It was a hopeful note, one that probably represents the resilience my friend tells me he admires most in me, the resilience my mentor Ellen said was one of my greatest strengths. It was necessary that I identified and rested on that resilience to push through the dichotomous loneliness and busyness of that conference week in 2021, the rest of the winter semester in sight. Advising meetings and research meetings persisted across every month and past the end of the school year. Summertime came as punctuation marks but not in the long paragraphs it used to—a staccato relief with no long, quiet family solitude. I wrote my way through the summertime, and we took vacations. Moses built his boat, and then another, and then another. We made a background with palm trees and set up the scene in anticipation of its eventual presentation.

One of the synonyms that pops up for *stewardship* in a Google search is *management*, a word with a significantly different connotation, a word that represents what I am trying to unlearn as I work to responsibly care for the people and tasks entrusted to me. Management is important—my paper planner is necessary for coordinating all the university and grade school events that my family works through each week. It is necessary for making sure grandparents get grandchildren time. It is necessary for making sure that the kids will be with me on certain weekends and with their dad on others. Management means that I pay the bills on time, that I schedule and hold meetings with students, and that I only need to make one trip to the grocery store every week. But stewardship of the time and emotion and brains it takes to do all of this work? That's a different thing.

I remember a conversation with a dear friend several years ago. I had gone to him because the feeling of burnout was traveling down from my tired brain and up from my clenched heart to somewhere in my neck and shoulders. I had gone to him because I needed to pause. I needed to check in with someone and say, "This is all too much right now." He reminded me in that conversation that probably not everything I was doing that month was mine to do. "But … ," I remember trying to protest. He put out his hand to stop me talking. "I know you

can do it the best," he said, "but not all of this requires you doing that."

Attention to stewardship means I consider not only the task to be done but how the benefits of that *doing* fall on everyone involved. A mom in management mode puts all the school bags by the front door the night before. A mom practicing stewardship reminds her children to get their school bags ready, so they learn how to be stewards of their own time. A professor in stewardship mode is mindful of the balance between work and rest, and how rest fuels the work. She is mindful of this not only for herself, but for her students. She might align due dates for projects with the reality of students' weeks, shunning the former Sunday night deadline for a weeknight instead, so students have time with their families and jobs. She might practice more grace. And she might find she is happy to not spend her own Sundays fielding panicked deadline emails anymore.

It's a lot for me to learn how to give my time and talents and treasures and to trust that others will give theirs in their own time. But I'm learning how to take what I know is true in my writing life and let it work its way into the rest of my living. Maybe it took two decades to learn how to have a work-life balance, and maybe I almost do. Maybe I can like both doing mom stuff and doing my job best of all the things I like doing. Maybe I can still do those things while I learn how to trust that some things—like learning my children and growing with my long-term friendships—persist and function in ways that don't permit me to check them off in my planner.