You’ll be OK

When I entered the workforce, at age 27, my goal was to shape environmental quality and protection in a relatively new country, Israel. My background—a bachelor’s degree in political economy of natural resources from the University of California, Berkeley, and a master’s degree in urban and regional planning from the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology—led to positions first in government and then at an environmental nongovernmental organization. My work was meaningful and influential, and it supported my husband’s studies: He had just finished military service and had no family financial backing. I hoped I would get a chance to go back to school when he finished.

After he finished his degree, my husband left me and our 3-year-old son. I returned to higher paid government work. Soon I moved back to the United States, to what I hoped would be a better job and to be near my family. I wanted to go for a Ph.D., but without financial support or sufficient savings—and worried about raising my son while concentrating on a Ph.D.—I continued for years in a predictable 9-to-5 job. But the work was political and unchallenging, and I watched as many of my co-workers sat at their desks, counting the years, months, or weeks until retirement. I was unhappy. I longed for a job I would love.

One day, I saw an announcement on the bulletin board: “Seeking Ph.D. Students.” The state university had opened a part-time public policy program and was recruiting state employees. It was what I was looking for: I could draw on my years of experience in government, and I could join a Ph.D. program and keep working part time. My recent remarriage meant I could afford to reduce my workload. My new partner was supportive.

I applied to the program and got in. I was 39 years old, pregnant with my second child—the first with my new husband—and looking forward to starting my studies in the fall. The pregnancy had no discoverable abnormalities, but when my daughter was 2 weeks old, she started having uncontrollable seizures. By the time I started the program, we were deep into dealing with severe birth defects. They led to a full right hemispherectomy when our baby was 10 months old.

I was on leave from work for most of this time, but I was always studying. I recall sitting at her hospital bed, reading literature and writing papers. Our daughter’s prognosis was not good, but I found in my studies not an escape but a vivid alternative that drew me in effortlessly and gave me deep satisfaction.

In time, having arranged myriad therapies for our daughter, I returned to my paid job. I continued my studies. We adopted a second daughter, from Russia. I finished my Ph.D., with distinction. I left government service and started a 2-year fellowship at Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution’s (WHOI’s) Marine Policy Center. My love of research, writing, and mentoring grew. I published well.

As my WHOI tenure came to a close, I had five on-campus interviews—but it was the economically disastrous year of 2009, and none of those opportunities panned out. So I took another postdoc, at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which led to my return to my alma mater—Technion—where today I am an assistant professor teaching and researching marine and coastal planning. My job is challenging and rewarding.

I have learned to value all of life’s experiences, the ups and the downs. Our daughter will always be significantly handicapped—her rehab from many surgeries was long, and life with half a brain is no cakewalk—but all my children and my husband have brought joy and perspective. At the same time, work—good work that I am excited to wake up to every morning—has been a source of strength on all fronts, personal and professional. Loving what you do and believing it is important won’t ensure that everything else is perfect, but if you persist you’ll make it through. This is a message I hope to pass on to my students.

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Editor's Summary

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