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Taking Risks

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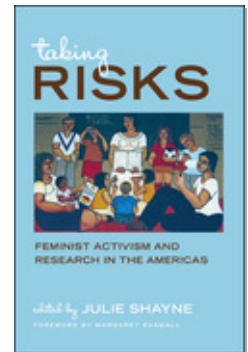
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AFTERWORD

Mother's Day

JULIE SHAYNE

In 2000 my husband and I left the West Coast for my excellent job in the Southeast. Neither of us wanted to leave but my career took priority. Every year on Mother's Day my mom and stepdad would travel from the Northwest to the Southeast so we could spend five rushed days together. And every year I went to my university's honors graduation. I was always quite thrilled to see my brilliant women's studies students graduate and wish their mothers happy Mother's Day, but it never stopped angering me that I could not be with my own mother and daughter. On Mother's Day 2006 all that changed; I resigned from my job, and my husband, two children, and I moved to the Northwest. I had no job waiting for me, just some good contacts and faith that my decision would work out.

As a native Californian I never imagined myself living in the South. As it turned out, the only job offer I got out of grad school was at one of the three southern universities to which I had applied. My now husband picked up his life from the San Francisco Bay Area and followed me to the other end of the political and cultural world. We always thought it would be temporary. We thought I'd get tenure and then I would just find that perfect job on the West Coast. I applied to a few jobs, and we fantasized about leaving. In the meantime, we got married, bought a house, had a daughter, made many friends, and visited the West Coast every chance we got.

My daughter was born two years after I started my job, and I was granted maternity leave and the option to stop the tenure clock. I did stop it but not without much consideration. Many senior faculty, typically moms, advised me not to stop it as reviewers expect one year extra of work. Others assured me that was not the case; you remind them you have a kid, and everyone understands ebbs and flows in productivity. In retrospect, I am pretty sure the moms were correct. For example, the first thing that goes when one has a new baby is conference presentations. When I got my postpartum review I was told I needed to present more papers at conferences. Observations like this made me feel extra pressured to prove myself at my pretenure review. So I finished my first book. This meant I spent the first fourteen months of my daughter's life writing a book. I was so obsessed that her first word was "book." As soon as my leave ended I was working fourteen-hour days, seven days a week. My husband did everything for my daughter except for nursing: he fed her, took her to daycare, bathed her, and so on. The days I worked on campus I left the house before she even woke up. I tried very hard to pick her up from daycare because it was one of the highpoints of the day even if I had to immediately hand her to my husband once we got home. I am grateful I have a husband and she a father who supported me in my efforts though it killed me when I would hear them giggle through the walls, and I was stuck at my computer. But I had to pass the review if I wanted to go up for tenure, so I just kept working. I had to get tenure to get a job on the West Coast. I missed my daughter like crazy, and we were living in the same house. I did, however, pass my review and received kudos for having published a book so early in my career.

After flirting with jobs on the West Coast it started to become clear that this was not going to happen. I would not find a job as great as mine in the area in which we wanted to live, and I wasn't willing to compromise my career. My husband was miserable. I felt guilty, and I missed my family as well. Every time my mother had to say goodbye to my daughter at the airport I cried. It killed me to watch my daughter and mother have to remake their relationship over and over and yet again have to say goodbye. It never got easier, only harder. We talked often about me just quitting my job and trying to teach at a community college. But how could I just throw away all of my hard work? What would people think? Why did I even bother going to graduate school if I am not even going to have a real job? My husband and I would go back and forth, and I would get close to saying, "Ok, I quit," but then the thought of ruining my career scared me back onto the tenure track, not to mention the message from my colleagues and mentors that deprioritizing my career isn't even an option.

On Mother's Day 2005 I found out I was pregnant again. Like all Mother's Days, I had been at the honors graduation while my family waited at home for me. We found out that evening, which proved a pretty spectacular Mother's Day gift. I went on sabbatical and maternity leave for a year, at which point we got ourselves back to the West Coast for what we thought was a temporary and rejuvenating stay. While pregnant I worked furiously on my second book right up until the day before my son was born. After his birth, long before I was getting any real sleep, I resumed writing. I was writing my maternity leave away, getting increasingly frustrated and depressed that rather than spend those precious early months with my son, I was worrying about tenure. I loved both my job and writing, but I also loved being a mother and knew that my son was the last baby I would have, and those early months are an amazing time. The stress from work, the frustration of not getting to spend time with my son, the postpartum hormones, and sleep deprivation merged to create a mild case of postpartum depression.

Mother's Day was approaching. It was going to be a special one because my mother and I could be together with our husbands and my two children, and it required no more than a six-minute drive. But it was also going to be the last Mother's Day we would have like that because just a few months later my family and I were heading back to my great job, in a place we did not want to live, with our families nowhere in sight. But what choice did we have? I did not go through graduate school for nothing, right?

Then it occurred to me: Why would quitting an excellent job mean graduate school was a waste? When I decided to be a professor did I mean only at an elite university? Did I intend to live someplace I did not want to live, just for a job? It is, after all, just a job, right? No, it is much more. As many of us know, being a feminist academic feels like more than just a job. We see ourselves charting new intellectual territory: writing women into history, discovering new ways to learn and teach, filling the universities with women faculty and thus role models for girls, and creating a reality where GE requirements include women's studies, western civ, and English composition. How could I abandon that agenda? How could I contribute to accomplishing these goals if I did not have a prestigious position? What message would I send women students, and worse yet my own kids, if I just up and quit and put motherhood first? What sort of intellectual and emotional cataclysm takes place in feminist academics that makes us feel guilty, feel like a failure if we let our families take priority over our careers? These questions had spiraled in my head since the moment my daughter was born. I remember telling one of my grad school mentors that I couldn't

stand having my daughter so far from my mother, and I wanted to quit, and he convinced me that was not an option. Similarly, I remember telling a senior colleague, also a mother, that we were miserable away from the West Coast and our families, and I wanted to quit; she said, "You can learn to be happy anywhere." She might be right, but why should we have to?

Just before Mother's Day 2006 I called my dean and both of my chairs and told them I was leaving my job. All three were incredibly kind and supportive. Academics understand being separated from their families, living somewhere they never imagined they would. Many academics do not even live fulltime in the same cities or states as their spouses. Academics are mentored to put our jobs first. We are taught that temporary or community college positions are not real jobs. I decided not to follow these guidelines any more. I cannot put my career first, nor can I stop working entirely. I love feeling like I am a part of something important for girls and women. I love teaching. I love watching youngish women learn things they would not have learned if women's studies did not exist. I love that my daughter pretends to write books and thinks everyone is her mommy's student. I love that she knows I am a professor. I have not given up on my career, but as one colleague (a mother) said, I have just taken it in a new direction.

I wrote "Mother's Day" in October 2006 after sharing my decision with both of my chairs and one of my deans. I close our collection with this chapter because it was this professional risk that provided me the intellectual space to pursue the project that resulted in this book. I am uncomfortable using the word "risk" to describe my move, especially in a volume that discusses risks replete with violence and alienation. But academia has defined my decision as a risk, so I use the term here. I include this chapter to contribute to our typically private conversations about family, quality of life, and career.