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Two-Career Chaos: A Look in the Rearview Mirror

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Two Career Chaos  
by Lisa Tauxe

I was allowed to grow roots. That's what hurt the most. There was a time when everything I owned fit in the back of my car and I could move into a new room in half a day. My posters on the wall, my doodads on my desk and I was HOME. Now my stuff fills a four bedroom house.

I don't need all my stuff. Sometimes I fantasize about having a huge bonfire and getting rid of it all. But it isn't the stuff that weighs me down – makes me want to stay. No, it isn't the stuff. Maybe it's my neighbors who are ready with spare eggs and a cup of milk or emergency child watching. Maybe it's my friends who like vines take years to cultivate, nurture, intertwine. Maybe it's my kid's babysitter who loves them as her own. Maybe it's the laboratory I built with my own hands, the research team I've assembled. Maybe it's the thought of the sheer effort of moving – packing boxes, finding a new house – finding a new babysitter, new neighbors, new laboratory. Maybe it's just that I've grown unaccustomed to moving. Maybe I've moved too much. Something, SOMETHING holds me down and ties me to this place I've grown to lovehate.

When I finished school I suppose I imagined myself as my dad. He worked hard, loved his job and family, made a good living. But I also saw myself as my mom – making a home, raising kids, cooking dinner, saving the world. I can handle being my mom and my dad. I can handle being a scientist and a mother. I can DO this.

What I never imagined was the chaotic dynamic of the two career couple. The motions of bodies moving in response to the force of gravity cannot be predicted exactly if there are too many bodies. They dance in a jerky jumble, now faster, then slowly, bouncing, jostling, bumping and flying apart. Just so are the career trajectories of the two career couple. One rises up, the other, slower, pulls it down; overtaking, blocking preventing, now supporting, pulling along, now holding back – not moving, leap frogging, racing in opposite directions and snapping back together with a crack.

The problem is non-linear. The outcome depends on feedback, whether positive or negative. The outcome cannot be predicted. Cannot be determined.

Perhaps it cannot be done. Perhaps both husband and wife cannot be both mother and father. Too many mothers, too many fathers. Chaos.

Perhaps it can be done. Perhaps not like our mothers and fathers but a different way. Maybe the jerky path through the mine field of life keeps us sharp, makes us work harder, leads us through more interesting lives.

My man and I were joined beside a ring of daffodils in a rose garden. My life spread out in all directions, branches and roots, science and family, job and home.

My job is complex. I teach, advise, soothe, stimulate, reassure, guide; I hustle the money, write the papers. I am glue and I am goad. I like my job. I have tenure. I am a professor. I like my job.

Children sprang from me, arms outstretched to embrace this life. I nursed them, rocked them, came to them when they laughed and cried. I love them, need them. They are mine. They love their dad who laughs loud and long, they love their mom with bedtime song, they love their dad who grows them berries, they love their mom who shows them fairies, they love their dad who builds and cooks, they love their mom who reads them books. How can this whole be broken? It cannot.

Now my husband has taken the perfect job for him. The one he's always wanted. A really good one so I can't ask him to turn it down. He's moving far away where finding a job for me will be hard. What wrenches and aches is this choice that seems so hard but is so clear so simple – the nochoice between my family and my beloved job. How can I choose to tear our family apart, the children loving both mommies and both daddies, my husband and me. There is no choice here.

So I am pulled up out of my soil by forces far stronger than the poor roots I've grown. I am no longer a tree. I am a seed now. Inside my hard shell is my family, my research, my plans. I can hold out. I will grow again and find my way back to the sunshine.

I'm packing up to go on leave – I'll keep my family whole and work the magic of my research elsewhere for a time. Maybe there will be a change in the weather here. If there is enough room, warmth and nutrients for both of us, we can return. After all ... I grew roots.

#### CODA:

So here's how the story ended. I went on a four year leave, kept my family whole and kept my research alive. Alas, there was no fertile soil for me, but there WAS a change in the weather where I came from and we did return. The children thrived and now are seeking roots of their own. My husband mourned the loss of his perfect job, but we celebrate together our lives, our family and our intertwined roots.