NO HAPPY HARMONY

Career and motherhood will always tragically conflict, Elizabeth Corey argues.

At least once a semester, a young female student will come to my office with questions about an assignment, and after we have finished our official business, will mention her concerns about the future: whether she should apply to medical school or take the less demanding physician’s assistant route, or whether she should marry right away and move with her husband for his job. Often she is the one with the better opportunity, and she wonders if she can expect her fiancé to follow her as she pursues graduate education at a prestigious East Coast school. Even if she isn’t in a romantic relationship, she wonders what it will mean for her goals when she is. Inevitably, she confesses that she is worried about the difficulty of pursuing both family and career.

Elizabeth Corey is associate professor of political science in the Honors College at Baylor University.
The decisions are not simple. "Why," asked Taylor, a former student, "if I sense a professional vocation, should I not pursue it? Failing to do so would be like burying my talents in the ground." Her insight is perhaps the one unproblematic and entirely admirable legacy of feminism: Because women are human, they should be free to pursue excellence, just as men do.

Another student quoted to me a line from the post-communion prayer of the Anglican liturgy, where the congregation beseeches God for the grace and assistance to "do all such good works as thou hast prepared for us to walk in." She confessed that she has always loved this prayer because she sees herself as blessed with multiple talents, but has never been quite clear about how to pursue them all.

These sorts of conversations weren't common when I graduated from Oberlin College in the early 1990s. Nobody talked of marriage or children. The very idea of marriage was considered odd and old-fashioned, although most of my friends did marry eventually, after a period of experimentation and cohabitation. Perhaps this is still the case at Oberlin and elsewhere, but my students at Baylor worry about marriage and family.

They are no less ambitious than women in any other American college, and most are as focused on success as are their male peers. But many come from conservative Christian backgrounds, where the natural differences between men and women are celebrated and mothers often stay at home. They appreciate that a woman's role in the family is something unique and valuable, and they are not persuaded by radical feminist arguments that marriage and motherhood are mere oppression. How then, they wonder, can the longing to have and care for children be combined with a sincere desire to achieve something of value outside the home?

Thus they ask a question at the forefront of popular literature about women and work: How can women "balance" professional interests and family? Like countless other women, I've had to juggle my obligations as a mother and wife with the demands of graduate study and then of teaching and scholarship. But I've slowly come to realize that this quest for balance, the desire to reconcile radically conflicting demands, is misguided. Work and family evoke from us two distinct modes of being and of relation to others. The conflicts between these modes cannot, if we are honest with ourselves, be wished away or ignored.

I've never had much interest in academic feminism. At Oberlin, I was inundated with the most radical varieties of feminist thought and practice. Words that are now mostly laughed at—herstory, womyn—were used in earnest back then. The women's studies department brought in feminist activists as lecturers, and the library routinely featured poster presentations about the objectification of women on television and in print. There was one single-sex women's dormitory at Oberlin, intended as a haven for self-identified lesbians or for those who were "seeking." All of this was foreign to me—another world from the one I had left behind in conservative south Louisiana.

Recent feminist writing, though, has begun to say not that women should forget about being wives and mothers and start to act more like men but that they should somehow play both roles at once. They should strive for success in the same way as men but also be wives and mothers.

The most famous example of this genre is Anne-Marie Slaughter's autobiographical essay in the Atlantic, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," which made the rounds last year. Having given up a promising career at the State Department because she felt a duty to spend more time caring for her teenage son, she returned from Washington (with some regret) to resume her position as a tenured professor at Princeton. But she sees this as something of a failure, or at least an unsatisfying compromise. She hopes that others will not have to make such choices in the future. If only there were as many women as men on corporate boards and in the Senate and on the courts, and perhaps even a woman president. This is her solution.

In Newsweek, Debora Spar, president of Barnard College, suggests a more "feminine" vision of reform. This includes sharing child care among neighborhood women and generally seeking solidarity with others in similar situations, as women in other countries have (supposedly) always done—not competing but cooperating. She diagnoses the problem as excessive individualism and competitiveness; we should foster communitarian arrangements for working women. If only women were nicer to one another and more supportive!

Sheryl Sandberg, chief operating officer at Facebook, sees the answer in the empowerment of women. "We hold ourselves back in ways both big and small," Sandberg writes in Lean In, "by lacking self-confidence, by not raising our hands, and by pulling back when we should be leaning in." But men must do their part as well. "A truly equal world," she writes, "would be one where women ran half our countries and companies and men ran half our homes. I believe that this would be a better world."
Of course these approaches have received criticism from those who say the writers don’t get the difficulties of working-class women or betray the feminist cause by encouraging young women to give up the fight for equality in the workplace. But many readers are grateful for a genre that seeks to confront the difficulties of having children and careers without simply saying either “work harder” or “stop working.” Yet this is precisely where such literature fails. It presents the problem as one that admits of solution primarily through political or social reform. But the problem Slaughter, Spar, and Sandberg describe is not at root sociopolitical. It is rather that the personal qualities required by professional work are directly opposed to the qualities that childrearing demands. They are fundamentally different existential orientations, and the conflict between them is permanent.

Flexible hours, parental leave, working from home, and other policy changes are necessary for women to flourish as professionals and mothers. But the core of the problem is more spiritual and psychological than political or social. A failure to recognize this is frankly to succumb to ideological blindness. To quote Spar again: “Feminism wasn’t supposed to make us miserable. It was supposed to make us free.” But “feminism” is not a lived life; it is a political movement, a set of ideas abstracted from experience and propounded as ethical imperatives. It should not surprise any thoughtful person when reality does not conform to the dreams of ambitious elites with bright ideas.

Taylor, my biblically articulate student, sees that she has a talent, and she feels called to develop it, which means giving herself to the hard work of pursuing excellence. To do so she must focus on herself, for the sake of the gifts she has been given. The problem is not that this work is time-consuming or that it reduces or eliminates a woman’s ability to do other things. The problem is that the serious pursuit of excellence requires a self-culture. The excellence is within us and must be developed: my musical potential brought to fulfillment, my academic aptitude developed and realized through education.

Many of the women in my classes are particularly captivated by the idea that a major component of human happiness is the pursuit (if not the achievement) of moral and intellectual perfection. In working through Aristotle’s Ethics, for instance, they find a compelling way of understanding what they do every day in their coursework. Like Aristotle, they are pursuing moral and intellectual virtues. And of course they are pushing themselves to reach concrete, worldly goals: to ace the MCATs, to write a really fine short story, to master ancient Greek, to play a Bach fugue with confidence and proficiency.

Yet in the midst of all this work, these young women are aware of the ever-present danger of pride (as are my male students, though perhaps less often). They have felt the futility of what Hobbes described so vividly as “the perpetual and restless desire of power after power.” They sense that other activities and other modes of life offer a very different kind of good: Worship, poetic contemplation, and love are quintessential examples.

My students know that motherhood is more like these activities than it is like the pursuit of excellence. They sense that caring for others requires us to put aside (at least temporarily) the quest for achievement, not just to make time but to create space for a different mode of being. Worship and love: These require no particular talent or cultivation of the sort I have been describing. They are gifts of the self, not achievements of the self.

The contrast between excellences we achieve and love we give appears in the distinction between ratio and intellectus that Josef Pieper highlights in Leisure: The Basis of Culture. Pieper wanted to recover an authentic notion of leisure in a contemporary world that seems to value only work, achievement, and endless practical activity. In ratio, reason serves extrinsic ends and the achievement of particular goals. Intellectus is receptive, and even passive in the sense of “suffering,” to experiences that cannot be controlled. We pause from our striving toward goals to pay attention, to observe, and ultimately to love.

Parenting requires ignoring for a time the individual quest for self-perfection and excellence and focusing instead on the needs of another person. This can be done only in what Pieper calls “leisure.” He does not mean inactivity or the absence of responsibility but the setting aside of goals, which is the condition of attention and activity that isn’t striving. In leisure we are available, disponible, which is why Pieper uses the term as a synonym for contemplation.

Leisure in this fuller sense is not part of the lives of modern feminist writers. By their own admission, they are consumed with a quest for individual betterment, for greater efficiency, and for time-saving strategies in daily life, going so far as to recommend better techniques for punching the numbers on a microwave oven. They frankly confess that they wish to be consummate achievers in the workplace as well as in their personal lives, as they train for marathons...
and eat healthfully to avoid gaining weight in middle age. They reap the rewards of all this focused work: promotion, money, attractiveness, and, most important of all, honor and recognition, much of it well deserved. They then expect to transfer this mentality and the same kind of pursuit of excellence directly into motherhood and childrearing.

But, if I am right, these two endeavors require different orientations of the self, and we simply cannot approach marriage and family in the spirit of achievement at all. If we try to do so, we will find ourselves frustrated and conflicted. For well-behaved or smart children are not markers of our success; children are ends in themselves, to be loved and cared for as individuals. They need from us something other than our talents; they need us, full stop.

Most women see this difference, at least to some degree. Caring for children takes place, for the most part, in private. There is no payment. Most of the time there is no audience. There are no promotions and few thanks. We often talk of trying to be a good parent, and rightly so, but it’s not an achievement, at least not in the same way that being a good pianist is an achievement. It is a kind of self-giving different from self-culture. The mode of being demanded by children isn’t of the sort that allows mothers (or fathers, for that matter) to engage in the self-culture that’s such an important part of any sustained pursuit of excellence.

And what do the children themselves desire? They want patience, calm, and the full attention of their mothers, which are exact opposites of what the hectic pace of professional work often requires. Children do not want a parent who is physically present but multitasking; they want that parent to look at them and listen to what they have to say. They want attention as they swim, draw, or play the piano. This requires Pieper’s leisure, a categorically different kind of focused activity that is not in the service of achievement. The sorts of endeavors that allow us to use and develop our God-given talents are very different from caring for the children God has given us.

It’s fashionable nowadays to call unpleasant situations “tensions” and to identify problems as “challenges,” as if by denying fundamental and sometimes tragic oppositions we might wish them away. Such words are used again and again in the contemporary essays I’ve been describing.

Their authors imagine solutions that strike me as evasions. “The best hope for improving the lot of all women,” writes Slaughter, “is to close the leadership gap: to elect a woman president and fifty women senators; to ensure that women are equally represented in the ranks of corporate executives and judicial leaders. Only when women wield power in sufficient numbers will we create a society that genuinely works for all women. That will be a society that works for everyone.” This is just the kind of utopian political prescription that emerges throughout this literature. Everything is about power—gaining and keeping it. Women will remake the world!

The assumption is, as I said, that motherhood and professional work are two of the same kinds of endeavor, activities on the same continuum of achievement. A recent feature in the Wall Street Journal has made such an argument more explicitly than I would have ever dreamed possible: A movement is now afoot to conduct family life on the model of a business. We should call business-like family meetings and compose a “family mission statement.” Children should be assigned tasks and receive “performance evaluations.” If we could just get the family to act more like our junior colleagues all would be well. The child qua employee would happily entertain himself, helping with the laundry, while we efficiently cross out items on our to-do lists. All of life would now be one long round of tasks—but at least we’d be “getting things done.”

It is worth imagining a hypothetical perfect world where women are equally represented in all political institutions and cooperate with other neighborhood women in taking care of children (on the model of a business), and where formerly recalcitrant husbands at last do their fair share around the house. Women are then freed from the “burdens” of taking care of children. But are they happy?

I’m afraid the answer is still no, at least if we listen to Anne-Marie Slaughter. She confesses that even with a supportive husband who is willing to shoulder nearly all the child care, she still does not feel comfortable being away from her son. There’s no rational explanation for this according to the theory that we just need more help and that the roles of men and women are functionally interchangeable. But there seems to be something in the nature of most women that wants not only to be sure that children are cared for but to do the caring themselves.

If this is so, and I think it is, doesn’t the “stay at home” argument make the most sense? Shouldn’t women, and especially those who are financially stable enough to do so, focus predominantly on family and children? This idea is worth careful consideration, although the mainstream press often treats it as a strange or oppressive view.
Many women want to stay home, and even secular elites have begun to see it as a desirable option. Witness the significant number of affluent, well-educated women who have, if perhaps with a bit of shame, opted out of the workforce because they recognize the benefits to their children. They see that devoting themselves to home and family yields great goods, which include an authentic division of labor between husband and wife as well as a mother’s ability to give undivided attention to her children. It is obviously the model that feminism has often disparaged, but its appeal endures.

Nevertheless, this option does not present an easy, one-size-fits-all solution to the conflict I have been describing. Sometimes staying at home is even promoted with an ideological fervor not unlike that of Slaughter, Spar, and Sandberg. And while I’ve sometimes felt the appeal of stay-at-home motherhood, it should not be idealized, as if it presented no difficulties.

To wit: Although the rewards of caring for children are great, motherhood can also be tiring and frustrating, not to mention lonely. A woman must be extraordinarily self-assured to withstand the self-doubt that might cause her to wonder at times whether she has done the right thing.

A stay-at-home mother may well be just as talented as her husband, but “the world” takes little notice of the work she does. After a dinner party, Jessica, who was an honors student at a prestigious college before she gave birth to her seven children, typically rails against her husband’s colleagues for their obliviousness to her existence as a mind. When put in these terms, it is not altogether clear who faces the more difficult situation: the “working mother” or the “stay-at-home mom.”

Moreover, the pitfalls of pride are not absent in this kind of life either. If the identities of working women tend to be bound up with achievement in their chosen fields, many stay-at-home mothers I know speak of the intense competitiveness, usually under the surface, that can spring up among women who do not work professionally outside the home. They quietly judge each other on the basis of their children’s discipline habits and academic achievement, or they gossip critically about the diets, appearances, marriages, and family lives of those they know.

I’ve learned not to idealize the mother who stays at home as the natural and obvious corrective to the conflicted, busy, ambitious professional woman. In fact, these women sometimes pay a high price for suppressing parts of themselves that call out to be developed and rewarded.

Christine, a young, devoutly Catholic woman, told me recently that over the past few years she has watched most of her college friends marry and start families. She, however, confessed a strong desire to pursue a scholarly life, not rejecting family and children but recognizing other goods, too. Should we discourage her? Of course not. Every time we admit a young woman into college or graduate school, we are implicitly telling her that we value her intellect and wish for her success. But she’ll surely face just the kinds of difficulties I’ve been describing.

I’ve assumed throughout that women possess a desire to care for children that they feel more strongly than men do. Many may balk at this, although I’m often struck by how widespread my presumption is among conservatives and liberals alike. What else could give Slaughter, Spar, and Sandberg the confidence that increased political power for women will make for a more family-friendly economy?

The observation that women, as a group, undoubtedly have more of the “nurturing” impulse than men do (stay-at-home dads in New York City and Portland notwithstanding) does not yield the conclusion that sex alone should determine a woman’s course of life (what I call “gender determinism”). It does imply, however, that we cannot come to terms with the difficulties women face in the present day until we consider the way in which we feel the competing inclinations in our own souls.

Modern women are right to think that both the pursuit of excellence and the desire to care for others are part of a fully flourishing life. Excellence in a particular field requires persistence, self-confidence, drive, courage, and initiative. These are eminently admirable qualities. On the other hand, serving or loving another requires the even more admirable qualities of attention, focus, care, patience, and self-sacrifice. The accent we place on them, and the way we put them into practice, is a matter for all of us to figure out for ourselves.

But we must not deceive ourselves. We cannot happily harmonize these two modes or pretend that they are somehow the same in kind. The disharmony is most apparent at the extremes, when we observe the two modes collapsed into one sphere of activity. We have all seen, for example, the driven mother who can talk of nothing but her own successes and those of her brilliant offspring, or the woman continually distracted by her iPhone, unable to focus on her children as she waits for the next important message to come in.Something is profoundly disordered.

At the other extreme, we probably know many women who have chosen not to pursue their own excellence. Of course there are better and worse...
reasons for this decision, the most admirable of which is devotion to nurturing others. Yet this also comes with costs. I've never forgotten Jessica's almost plaintive confession to me late one night, years ago, after too much wine. "My husband," she said, "has done the things that I really wanted to do, and could have, but didn't." The optimist in me wanted to tell her it wasn't too late, but it was, and we both knew it.

Both the ethical imperatives I've described—"must work" and "must stay at home"—reflect noble desires, the one for talents fully used and the other for the vocation of motherhood. But I worry that both are too often promoted ideologically, prescribed as answers to the anxieties young women naturally feel about what they should do. This problem is especially pressing for those high-achieving college students I have been describing, who cannot imagine doing anything—be it career or motherhood—halfheartedly.

It's the tacit denial of the tragedy of the human condition that I've come to resent in the contemporary literature about "balancing" career and family. This literature is full of demands for Justice and Equality, its authors motivated by ideas of social perfection: to finally place a sufficient number of women in the ranks of management and government and to effect true gender equality in the workplace as a whole. Engaged on a quest to change the world, they write with a fervor generated by a political ideal and employ the language of political advocacy, as if the divided desires of our souls can be unified by Reform and Revolution. There is a solution for everything, they imply; we just haven't found it yet.

But this simply isn't so. I know from personal experience that this conflict in the soul does not go away, no matter how pleasant and accommodating our colleagues may be, or how flexible our schedules. We are limited, embodied creatures. These limits mean that we cannot do everything to its fullest extent at once, and certain things we may not be able to do at all. The tragic aspect of this is that both excellence and nurture are real, vital goods and that the full pursuit of one often, and perhaps inevitably, forecloses fully pursuing the other.

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**MONUMENTS**

You're with us still, your names engraved in stone,
Inscribed in bronze, recited every May.
Fresh flowers—mums, carnations, roses—say
The pain's still fresh: our grieving's never done.
Your serried graveyard markers—though you're gone—
Compel reflection on Memorial Day.
Our sculptors' art preserves your mortal clay:
Each marble image conjures flesh and bone.

We've promised that we'll always keep you here,
But memories etched in rock must disappear:
The steles raised to keep you in our sight
All fall to dust beneath the centuries' might.
Time mocks us when we swear your fame must live:
We feign a gift that only God can give.

—Bryce Christensen
WORK–LIFE IMBALANCE

I agree with Elizabeth Corey ("No Happy Harmony," October) that there will always be conflict between motherhood and career, but I don’t agree with her reasons. She contrasts the leisure needed for love of children with the self-culture needed for the pursuit of excellence in a career as if they were (in her words) "two distinct modes of being." But I think that draws too sharp a contrast.

Self-culture always requires loving what is not the self. It demands leisure because love means paying attention, and paying attention takes time. All good work requires diligence, the attentiveness born of love (from the Latin diligere, to love). And this attentiveness to what is not the self is what perfects the self in any art, skill, virtue, or wisdom.

That is the mode of being common to all worthwhile human work, from motherhood to politics and economics. That is why a teacher paying attention to students is often doing a bit of mothering, just as a mother raising her children is surely doing quite a bit of teaching. These are different activities, to be sure, but they are not different modes of being. They are all forms of the pursuit of human excellence and flourishing, all of which tend toward the perfection of the self in love.

Insofar as the recent feminist literature Corey cites is concerned instead with the pursuit of what we now call achievement and success, its aim is what Aristotle called honor, not excellence or virtue. This is a distinctly lesser good that cannot perfect us or make us happy. There is no need to "balance" this with the goods of child care, which make a far superior contribution to human happiness.

What needs to be balanced—and often can't be—is, quite simply, time. We don't have enough time for everything, and therefore we don't have enough love to go around. The basic fact that our time is limited is the deep root of many tragic conflicts in the lives of finite, temporal creatures. We can't be good at everything.

Phillip Cary
EASTERN UNIVERSITY
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA

I have no complaint with Elizabeth Corey’s handling of the career-and-motherhood conflict other than to ask, “How should men deal with their career dreams conflicting with family responsibilities?” Feminist women are not the only ones who face soul-rending choices. Men don’t have all the luck and all the fun.

How many men would gladly chase a career in their collegiate field but for the fact that the various pressing needs of family, location, and opportunity tie them to a wholly different trajectory, much to

LETTERS

We welcome letters to the editor. Letters appear two issues after the article to which they are responding. Letters under forty hundred words are preferred, and they may be edited for length and clarity.

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ft@firstthings.com.
their dislike? Plumbing, treetopping, or car sales are great careers if you love them. But if you are trapped into them only because they provide a good living for your family, they can be a continual trial and testify to a man’s sacrificial dedication. It’s the old George Bailey story all over again, which makes for a great movie but a hard twenty to thirty years to live out.

Yes, families and careers are often at odds. But no one knows this better than the men who carry the weight of caring for and supporting single-wage-earning families.

Maynard Nordmoe
KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE

Elizabeth Corey is astute in recognizing that the problem with the search to balance career and motherhood is not one that will find its answer in sociopolitical reform. I wonder, however, whether she is right that career and motherhood have “fundamentally different existential orientations”: work toward “self-culture” and motherhood toward “self-giving.”

In the Fall of Man, our loves became disordered and, as a result, our approach to work and to family changed. Jonathan Edwards once wrote, “Before, and as God created [man], he was exalted, and noble, and generous; but now he is debased, and ignoble, and selfish.” In other words, self-giving is God’s original design for both work and family, and self-culture is a distortion of that design.

Corey does a great job in describing the self-giving nature of motherhood as God originally intended it. Yet she barely touches on the distorting effects of self-culture on motherhood. What about mothers who are hyper-present or set inflexibly high standards? Are they always driven by self-giving love or is their interest at times distorted by self-culture?

In the context of career, she does the opposite: She misses the opportunity to describe self-giving as God’s original intention for work and instead suggests that self-culture is fundamental to it. Yet there are companies that promote humanized workplaces, where managers value excellence and leisure, where investment decisions are made to benefit the common good. On what virtue are such workplaces built if not self-giving love?

The real tension, therefore, is not between work and career but between God’s original intention of self-giving and the Fall’s distorting effect of self-culture. Even here, however, there is hope.

Edwards continued: “But God, in mercy to miserable man, entered on the work of redemption, and by the glorious gospel of his Son, began the work of bringing the soul of man out of its confinement and contractedness, and back again to those noble and divine principles. . . . And it is through the cross of Christ that he is doing this; for our union with Christ gives us participation in his nature.”

May we live, therefore, coherent and wholehearted lives at home and at work as we pursue the restoration of self-giving in both career and family.

Bethany L. Jenkins
NEW YORK, NEW YORK
Elizabeth Corey's essay is a refreshing, honest, and candid analysis of the conflict between career and motherhood. She writes, "Parenting requires ignoring for a time the individual quest for self-perfection and excellence and focusing instead on the needs of another person," but I would argue that parenting does not preclude the quest for self-perfection and excellence, unless by these words one means only or primarily worldly recognition.

Why is the effort to be the best possible mother not pursuing excellence, yet pursuing maximum profit for a major corporation is? A schoolteacher is pursuing excellence, but a homeschooling mom is not? Yes, the schoolteacher gets a paycheck, but the mother teaching her own children is using the power and insight of her maternal love to shape souls that she is uniquely qualified and obligated to shape.

The latter work, while focusing on the needs of another, also greatly contributes to the development of the mother herself. Mothering expands a woman's capacity to love and to live a life of virtue, something that work outside the home may or may not do.

In the beloved children's book Charlotte's Web, Charlotte the spider, who had done some very notable things in her life, still described the laying of her eggs as her "magnus opus." Whether mom is in the boardroom or at home, the raising of her children is always her greatest work. I would suggest that striving to raise her children to the very best of her ability is a mother's purest pursuit of excellence.

Rosemary Bogdan
ANN ARBOR, MICHIGAN

Elizabeth Corey makes a compelling case for a semi-permeable membrane between the culture of self-achievement (career) and the culture of self-giving (motherhood). It does, however, flow in reverse.

The professional women I've worked with who have put their careers on hold to become stay-at-home mothers are, if and when they return to the workforce, more adept leaders and more skilled problem-solvers. There is a nuanced change in their perspective: They see the whole of issues more clearly and can put things in their proper place. Having been to the City of God, they don't sweat the City of Man so much. They are more relaxed, more confident, more forward thinking—and more rewarding and enjoyable to work with and for.

Motherhood can be a good career move.

Mark R. Proska
SPRINGFIELD, PENNSYLVANIA

What Elizabeth Corey poignantly identifies as the tragic conflict permanently clash for mothers. Speaking as a mother of eight children who holds an endowed chair in the professoriate and has been a La Leche League leader for over a quarter of a century, I suggest that a subtle change in perspective may be helpful in moving past this tragic view of motherhood. I learned this alternative perspective not from women, but from certain inspiring men in my life.

One of the things I learned is that there is another way to approach a career besides focusing on achievement and self-cultivation. And that is to get on one's knees and ask what good you should do in the world with the talents with which you have been endowed. If one is then given that call—if you feel you have been called by a Higher Power to do a certain good work in the world—a career is not, in that context, an act of self-cultivation; rather, it is an act of self-giving. In that perspective, a career can be a form of "being there" for a world in need.

Second, our world is not better off for having excluded from "the table" those who have "been there" for children, our collective future. It is a form of "being there" for the world for a mother to make her way to that table. Mothers have a sacred obligation to help shape the larger world their children, and all children, will live in. Our world is impoverished and darkened to the extent that they are excluded from "the table" where that shaping occurs—and it is impoverished and darkened to the extent that mothers themselves do not commit to reaching that table for the sake of their children.

Motherhood need not be seen as entailing tragic either-or choices. Just like the turtles of legend, it can be seen as mothering all the way down.

Valerie M. Hudson
TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY COLLEGE STATION, TEXAS
between the goods of career and motherhood—between achievement and love—in any woman’s life is magnified if an analogous conflict occurs in the lives of men. Not only disappointment but the potential for serious marital dissonance seems apparent in her friend Jessica’s “plaintive confession” that her husband “has done the things I really wanted to do, and could have, but didn’t.” Surely such disharmony would diminish the joys of motherhood, perhaps explaining why the literature is full of recourse to achievement, where one might be thought to depend on one’s own arms.

But can’t the existence of incommensurable goods serve as the beginning of reflection about our social practices, not as a cause of despair? Achievement and love may not be reducible to some formula or algorithm, but they need not always be at odds: Excellence often grows with the support of love and, in turn, defers to it.

Part of the issue has to do with what the world honors nowadays—achievement, not love, usually—and what the world honors is most often what opens opportunities, whether for love or for excellence. Or are there always opportunities for love?

James R. Stoner, Jr.
PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

In speaking from our experience, we may struggle in conversing with those with dissonant experience. As Elizabeth Corey notes, her discussion assumes that women “possess a desire to care for children that they feel more strongly than men do.” This assumption utterly fails to capture my experience with the men in my life. It was my father, for instance, who bandaged my wounds, held me while I cried after being bullied, and let me sit for hours on his lap, watching him work on his oil paintings.

The last example points to a problem with Corey’s argument for a permanent conflict between the professional mode, which requires focus on oneself, and the child-rearing mode. In pursuing his artistic excellence—and in sharing it with me—was my father focusing on himself? Clearly not; but he would not have been focusing on himself had I not been there, either. He would have been focusing on his painting.

Pursuing excellence requires self-culture only in a secondary sense. Such excellence always requires an outward focus on the object of one’s work, and aspiring professionals forget this at their peril.

No one set of virtues promotes good parenting. The parent who attends lovingly to her child’s need for attention may struggle to teach that child that its needs are not always paramount. The professional who excels at getting things done may find that her efficiency has destroyed her creativity. Harmony is elusive indeed, but not only when we approach the personal-professional divide.

I could not agree more with Corey’s concerns about our culture’s scorn of receptivity and its failure to appreciate leisure in Josef Pieper’s sense. But this is a problem for men as well as women. We certainly ought not to accept facile solutions that begin by assuming the values of our current culture. But nor should we accept dichotomies that abandon men to a form of life inimical to contemplation, worship, and love. If there were an ultimate tragedy between two modes here, it would be a tragedy for us all.

Margaret Watkins
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Elizabeth Corey responds:

I’m grateful for the many comments I’ve received, including the many that came to me directly. The most substantive of these have focused on the essay’s fundamental distinction between self-culture (or what I’ve called excellence) and nurture.

Several commentators argue that both focus essentially on something that is “not-self,” whether that be an art or skill or another person. I agree with them in this sense: If “self-culture” is excessively focused on ourselves and not on the activity we are supposedly pursuing, then of course we have really missed the point. We are then concerned with our own advancement and reputation; we desire recognition and honor, not excellence for its own sake; we succumb to pride. The activity we are pursuing—whatever it is—takes second place to our own quest for self-advancement.

Others have made a somewhat different case against my distinction, arguing that self-culture itself is a result of the Fall of Man and that it is fundamentally a disordered love. On this reading, our task is not to pursue both self-culture (excellence) and nurture but to recognize that self-culture is a falling away, a degeneration, from the one good and authentic way of orienting ourselves toward work, which is self-giving. They would like to say that work of any kind is fundamentally care for others.

I confess that I’m unpersuaded by these arguments, though I’m also sympathetic to them. I don’t doubt that many of us would like to integrate the two modes, and I do believe that there are ways of doing so, to varying degrees. There is certainly a place for self-giving in the pursuit of excellence.

Depending upon the kind of work, self-giving may even lie at the heart of a quest for excellence, as it does, say, in teaching, ministry, social work, or nursing. Nor would I say that motherhood does not also call for many of the qualities I have attributed to self-culture: determination, persistence, patience, and single-mindedness.

I do, however, think that the two endeavors are at bottom quite different. The pursuit of excellence in the Aristotelian mode is intimately tied to one’s awareness of oneself
and one's abilities. It cannot be otherwise. Nurture, on the other hand, seems to require a radical renunciation of self. Our personal projects and aspirations must be put aside in order to care for someone else. We must forget ourselves—for an hour, a day, a week, or years, as the case may be.

In trying to excel at something, we are trying—let me say it—to perfect ourselves to the extent we can. Thus the endless hours in the practice room, science lab, art studio, or gym. Nevertheless, at the end of all this, in a curious way, there is often a renunciation of the self, and an emphasis on the skill or art one has developed. Thus the need for anonymity in certain endeavors, as in blind-peer-reviewed scholarly articles or orchestral auditions performed behind a curtain. What matters in these cases is emphatically not the person but the art he or she has perfected.

I will never forget one of my college professors, who spent his professional life showing his students the importance of classical and Christian authors for living an authentically good, moral life. Yet he told us one day that “when I’m on the operating table, having double bypass surgery, I must confess I don’t care whether my surgeon has understood and internalized Plato’s analysis of the soul. I care only that he’s an excellent surgeon and knows his craft inside and out.”

This points to something I consider vital: There really is a sphere of professional excellence that we value for its own sake. Quite often, we simply want the best person for the job, regardless of whether or not that person is kind, generous, giving, or humble, or a good mother or father in private life.

Contrast this with the “nurture” I have described as essential to mothering. Of course there is excellence in mothering. But it is not a cultivation of self and one’s art or craft but rather a (perhaps welcome) loss of self.

What is aimed at is not perfection of the self but attention to the other for the other’s sake.

It is almost as if the self, with all the achievements and desires that she may have, must recede altogether. She must love and serve another. She must not think of her own good, or the good of her art, or of her chosen professional vocation, but the good of someone else.

This is indeed a stark distinction, but I think it holds. It is also the source of the condition that I have called tragic. I do not mean tragic in the colloquial modern sense of “terrible” or “sad.” Rather, as in ancient tragedy where characters clashed over incommensurable goods, I see the two modes of being as both good, but to a great degree opposed.

One other point is worth making, which numerous readers have brought to my attention: Where do men stand in all of this talk about excellence and nurture? A short answer would be “in exactly the same place as women.” As several writers point out, men have been dealing with the conflict between work and family for a very long time.

I do think, however (and this is contested by some), that in general most women feel the pull to nurture more than most men do. Are there exceptions? Of course. But this call toward nurture explains, I think, why the question of “balance” is at the forefront of the modern feminist discussion. Women may act just like men in any number of ways, but they very often feel the call to nurture, and the guilt of ignoring that call, more poignantly than men do.

MARY, MARY

Matthew Milliner writes of Maximus the Confessor’s fascinating “death blow to phalliccentrism,” as expressed in his phrase “not through seed but by the power of the Most High” ("Our Lady of Wheaton," October).

This has its scriptural antecedent in what we might call the annunciation to Abraham in Genesis 17, where the patriarch is informed that the covenant is to be established, not through his natural liaison with Hagar (whose son Ishmael will nevertheless be endowed with all the fullness of the primum blessing of Genesis 1:28), but through a son born to his wife Sarah. This earlier knob is fittingly inscribed in Abraham’s phallus through the rite of circumcision.

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Matthew Milliner’s “Our Lady of Wheaton” was a very inspiring read, I am unsure, however, whether he sufficiently explored Thomas Aquinas on the matter of original sin and Mary.

As Frank Beckwith explains, Thomas Aquinas wrote that while Mary was conceived with original sin “nevertheless, it was removed by God after she was conceived. . . . She was also the recipient of an abundance of grace so that she may be protected from all actual sin. So, St. Thomas’s view, though not the view currently held by the Church as dogma, remains (a kind of) logic on which the Church’s dogma is based.”

Furthermore, in his Commentary on the Angelic Salutation (Expositio Salutationis Angelicae), Thomas analyzes Luke 1:28 and states: “Sin is either original, and from this she was cleansed in the womb, or mortal or venial, and from these she was free. . . . For we know that to her was granted grace to overcome every kind of sin by Him whom she merited to conceive and bring forth, and He certainly was wholly without sin.”

It is my understanding that even Bernard of Clairvaux believed Mary was cleansed from original sin before birth. For example, in the Letter to the Canons of Lyons he stated, “If Mary could not be sanctified before