

Narrative Reflections on Occupational Transitions

A Master's in motherhood?

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1. A Master's in motherhood?

The summer of 2009 began with only two goals in mind: To fully enjoy the beautiful weather and to get ready for a triathlon in August. Since I had just completed the first semester of graduate school at the University of New England, I was fully enjoying that I had no homework to complete and no tests to worry about. With approximately two to three hours each day that I could dedicate to training, my conditioning was right on schedule. It had been ten years since I was in such good shape and I was feeling strong and fit. I had beaten my time of the previous triathlon and knew that I would finish way ahead of where I placed the first time around. It was going to be a wonderful summer though little did I know it was also going to be a summer of surprises.

In late June, after finishing a 20 mile bike ride, I found out that I was pregnant. There I sat on my bathroom floor in complete shock because having a baby in graduate school certainly was not in the plan. I was absolutely terrified and unable to get in touch with my husband to share the news. I had no idea how I was going to be a full time student and a mom. A phone call to my mom gave me the answer that I needed. She wisely explained, "You are just going to do it. That is all there is to it." I heard those words many times over the last two years, and she continues to be right each time.

My husband came home and I told him the news. He was ecstatic, while I continued to question if we were really going to be able to do this. His smile said yes,

but I was unsure. He returned to work and I sat with my thoughts, making a plan. Planning was something that I was able to do without difficulty. It was in that moment, sitting in my living room, that I made the decision that I could and would earn my master's degree, but it would no longer be for me; I was going to do this for my baby. I would become an occupational therapist, not only for me, but for my child. I wanted my baby to know that I completed school and pursued my dreams even though there were challenges. I knew that I wanted my child to be proud of me for this accomplishment.

The next few months were spent battling morning sickness that lasted all day, the realization that I could no longer work out two to three hours per day, and preparing for the upcoming school year and motherhood. I needed to have as much ready for my baby as was possible because school was going to take over every spare minute when September arrived. These preparations included sharing the news with friends and family, as well as figuring out how I was going to tell the faculty. I did not know many of the faculty at that point, but by September I was more than ready to share the news. Each and every one of the staff members was supportive and excited, which helped me feel as though I had made the right decision to continue with school.

I made it through the first semester and until spring break of the following semester. My daughter decided to arrive late, waiting until the first day of spring break to make her entrance into the world. I guess she knew that the less school I missed, the better off I was go-

ing to be in the end. Before rushing out the door on the day she was born, I grabbed my bag full of occupational therapy books. After all, I was going to be induced, so what else would I do while experiencing labor for the first time? It was, in my mind, a perfect time to get ahead with reading. That never happened as those books stayed in the bag because, yet again, my daughter had a different plan.

A few hours later, after an emergency caesarean section and more worry than I had ever before experienced, I was introduced to the most amazing little person, my daughter. It was in that very moment that all my worry about becoming a mom vanished. My mom's words rang true, I had done it, I had my baby girl and I had become a mom in the process. That little person staring back at me, looking just like her daddy, was the absolute picture of love. So began my transition from full time student to full time mom and student.

Those first few weeks were spent adjusting to life with a newborn. My mom stayed with us for several more weeks, helping my husband and me adjust to the sleepless nights and figuring out how to again get one foot in front of the other. My plans for homework were nothing more than plans. I was completely exhausted, yet completely content to be with my little one as much as possible. In the end, I knew that I needed to return to school, so five weeks after my daughter was born we headed off to join the land of occupational therapy again. My daughter went with me that first day, not because she needed me so much, but because I needed her. I needed to know that my two worlds could work together and that I could make it through a class. That day was successful, so I knew I could do it.

The next morning I woke up early, grabbed my books and my breast pump and headed out on my own for the first time since I had my baby. I cried the entire way to school, but knew that I was doing the right thing. After all, she was home with her daddy and would be absolutely fine. Surprisingly, I made it through that day as well. Although it very difficult, I had to admit that it was great to be back at school with my occupational therapy family.

Despite never getting enough sleep, breast feeding, and the need to step out of class to pump several times a day, I made it through the semester. At the end of that semester, with many incompletes, I knew that something had to change. Realization set in that I could not do it all as I had absolutely no balance in my life and I needed more time with my family. Thankfully, the faculty supported this decision and a few weeks later, I was able to stay at home with my daughter for a to-

tal of six weeks. During that time, I really got to know myself as a mom and was able to focus on my daughter and nothing else. My daughter began to enjoy the works of Dr. Suess, rather than Pedretti. Though I kept in touch with my classmates and missed seeing them, I knew that school would be there in a few short weeks. I needed that time to fully grasp the importance of the occupation of motherhood, as well as how badly I wanted to succeed as a mom. It was during those six weeks that I learned that there truly is no occupation more difficult, or more satisfying than that of motherhood.

It was that reality that got me through the next year of clinical and classroom work. Even though I continued to have moments that I felt completely overwhelmed trying to find balance between my familial, work, and academic responsibilities, I still moved forward. As I continued to work hard both at school and at home, in December of 2011, my dream became a reality. I graduated with my master's degree in occupational therapy, completing my last Level II fieldwork just three months after my classmates.

Those final three months gave us yet another challenge, my daughter and I had to move in with my parents, 250 miles away from my husband. My parents took care of my daughter so that I could focus on the clinical work, and my husband took care of everything at home, driving up each weekend to be with the family. As he became increasingly fatigued, I became more eager to reach the end of this journey. In November, I accepted a job offer from the hospital where I had completed my first Level II fieldwork, and I knew that my journey was winding down. Receiving my diploma in January and scheduling the date for the boards were the final pieces to be put into place. It was time to finish up and fully realize my dream of becoming an occupational therapist. The three of us needed to celebrate the end of a long and wonderful three year journey into the field of occupational therapy, which had been unexpectedly accompanied by parenthood.

My daughter turned two this past March and there were times that I heard "momma busy studying" as I was busily preparing for the boards. Those words tugged at my heart strings and I could not help but feel badly. It was a happy day when I was able to tell her that momma no longer needed to study, momma had passed the boards! She watched me take down the study posters and questioned why it was that I was doing that. It was with a happy heart that I explained that I had really done it, I was an occupational therapist! That moment left me smiling, knowing that I had taken

this journey for her just as much as for me. Now, all I can I hope for is that one day she will hear the story of her first two years and she will be just as proud of her momma as I am of her each and every day.

2. Points to ponder

How different would this journey have been without the support of family, friends, coworkers, and faculty?

How can we, as a society, make it easier for mothers to strive for higher education with the many demands that motherhood places on women?