

# BRAIN, CHILD

*the magazine for thinking mothers*

## Utopia Lost and Value Reframed

By [CNF](#)

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By Debi Lewis

*Am I home because a woman should be home or am I home because, as a woman, economic forces guided me there?*

Here is the utopian dream, masquerading as a concrete plan, which I formulated before my second child was born in August of 2005:

My well-paying, full-time flexible-hours technology job at a national nonprofit organization would continue as it had for the next year, after which I would begin a PhD program in writing at a local university (which happened to have on-campus childcare). I would fill my days with heady conversation and scoop my children up in the afternoon to eat ice cream on the campus lawns and return home to my husband—who would keep us afloat with his job in finance, the one he loved as much as I loved the idea of academia.

This plan never came to fruition.

My baby was born with a host of ambiguous medical problems. She was in the hospital with dangerous respiratory infections twice in her first four months, and her doctors gently and then less-gently told us that daycare would continue that cycle. She was considered medically fragile. By the end of the second hospital stay, which was five days long, we had decided she could not stay in daycare.

We did the math; if we hired a nanny, the cost per year would have been more than half of my salary. Our older daughter would still need to attend preschool, adding another several thousand dollars. My husband made more money than I did. It made more sense for me to leave my job. Our baby was five months old when I did.

My well-paying, good job had been my identity for five years. Prior to that, I'd been employed in one way or another for the previous fifteen years—starting in high school.

Suddenly, I had no income.

My husband was working, earning a salary that covered our expenses, though not as easily as when I'd been employed. I sat down at my kitchen table on that first day when my husband left for work—and I didn't—and I cried. I was in my pajamas, and when I went upstairs to put on clothes, the baby still slung over my hip, I looked at my closet and realized that most of what I owned was business-casual.

Then I got a rejection letter from the graduate program to which I'd applied. The last piece of hope I'd had for an identity which declared to the world that *this woman is making something of herself* had vanished. Though there was hope that my daughter would outgrow her fragile state by the time the fall semester came around, I would have no fall semester to attend. Instead, I nursed, rocked, held, walked, medicated and worried over my constantly-sick baby. *What just happened?* I asked myself, over and over for months. I remained, for a long time, shocked to see what I thought I had become: bored and boring.

In the years that followed, I scraped together a new life, starting my own consulting business in hours snatched from naps and, as my daughter's health improved, while she was in preschool. I now have new dreams—smaller dreams, always tied to my need to stay flexible for my children. With both of them in school these last few years, I work out of a local coffeehouse that sells scones delivered warm every morning. It has not been terrible; at times, it has felt like a close second to my original plan.

Still, I resent those early days, the burden falling on me and the perspective-shifting I had to do. I resent that, as a natural progression of being the one at home and being a woman, I've fallen into gender roles I never intended. I am the one who cooks. I am the one who shops for the organic berries and the mint Oreos, knows the children's friends and teachers better, and manages the laundry. In a nine-to-five job that, inclusive of commute is really a seven-thirty-to-six-thirty job, my husband has become the one to pop in and "help out" with occasional rides to Hebrew School and play rehearsals, but the real burden of making sure everyone is where they need to be is left to me. It's my job because, nine years ago, I left my other job to stay home with my sick baby, a baby I both loved fiercely and resented quietly.

How to unravel all of that? Am I home because a woman should be home or am I home because, as a woman, economic forces guided me there? What if my husband and I had made exactly the same amount of money? Would he be home? What if medical insurance covered at-home childcare for children like my younger daughter? Would neither of us be home?

I feel very lucky that we made it work, un-utopian as it felt to me at the start. As I struggle with what it means to be an at-home parent—even with my part-time consulting business—I have a partner willing to struggle through it with me, to talk about and name this arrangement for what it is: fragmented. My daughters are now thirteen and almost nine, and they see the juggling every day. I am in and of both worlds all the time—sometimes from the same spot in my kitchen, on the phone with a client and stirring the soup.

Now, most mornings, I walk to the neighborhood elementary school with my once-sick baby—now a thriving nine-year-old. In one hand, I hold hers. In the other, I hold the bicycle I'll use to ride to the coffeehouse where I'll work for much of the day. There's dinner to prepare, and laundry to sort. Rides to give, and counters to scrub.

It is, in the end, a comfortable life. I am there for it all. Sometimes, on the playground after school, we even eat ice cream.

*Debi Lewis is the mother of two daughters and blogs regularly at [swallowmysunshine.com](http://swallowmysunshine.com). You can find her essays at Brain, Child Magazine, RoleReboot, Mamalode, The Mighty, Kveller, and ChicagoNow. She is currently at work on a memoir about her younger daughter's journey through medical mystery.*