

ENTERTAINMENT

Catherine Mallette: Having it all vs. having enough

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On a recent cold and foggy Sunday morning in Nantucket, I decided that, no, I wouldn't be going to the beach. I wouldn't be riding the bike I'd lugged to the island, or taking the run I'd envisioned. For the third day in a row, my vacation plans were thwarted, so I decided to stay in bed with my laptop and contemplate the idea of women "having it all."

I watched the infamous 2010 TED talk from Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, author of the current bestseller "Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead." I read a recent interview with her in McKinsey Quarterly, in which she said, "No one can have it all. ... I think what happens to women is we compare ourselves at home to the women who are work-at-home mothers and we fall short. ... And then you can compare yourself at work to some women but mostly men who have no other responsibilities, really. They go home whenever they want. And you can feel bad there, too."

Next I skimmed through Anne-Marie Slaughter's much-talked-about 2012 cover story for The Atlantic on "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." Slaughter, who had a high-ranking job in Hilary Clinton's State Department, returned to teaching at Princeton for a variety of reasons, including, as she wrote, that "juggling high-level government work with the needs of two teenage boys was not possible." (She's now starting a new gig at a think tank in D.C.)

And finally, I read Maha Atal's Forbes response explaining why she was unimpressed by Slaughter's definition of feminism, noting that it's not about a woman doing anything and everything she wants without consequences.

All this reading let me to several of my own thoughts about women, men, work, feminism and children, including the following:

a) Does anyone really believe that men have ever had it all? Most of the fathers I know who work outside the home have missed out on a lot in their kids' lives. But men don't do the kind of public soul-searching that we've seen from the likes of Sandberg, Slaughter, et al.

b) Does anyone really believe he or she doesn't need to make compromises? I liked my job when my kids were little, but it meant a white-knuckle drive to get to the day care on time each evening. I could have taken a job that gave me more flexible time, but I never found one that also offered an equivalent salary or benefits. You're not necessarily compromising yourself when you make a compromise: You are simply Tim Gunning a situation and making it work.

c) Stay-at-home mom friends were essential when my kids were little. They were helpful, cooperative and made my kids' school a better place with all the volunteer hours they put in. I should have thanked them more.

d) No one should feel bad about going home after putting in a full day of work. Having a life outside work makes you happier, and happier people are better employees.

e) I am tired of parents who don't understand that if they choose to have kids, they might sometimes need to make compromises that extend beyond the workplace. They might have to settle for eating spaghetti at their rented beach house with their exhausted kids instead of dragging those poor progeny to a \$25-a-plate Nantucket restaurant where the children will cry nonstop.

At this point in my contemplation, my sister walked by on her way to her work -- she owns a deli and meat market. Laura is a Columbia business school graduate and once had some high-paying CPA job in Manhattan. "So," I said, "what do you think about women today?"

"I'm in favor of them," she said simply. But nobody can do everything, she added, noting that she herself was already 20 minutes late because she has two mastiffs in the house that needed their breakfast, and she still needed to stop for coffee because part of her personal formula for "having it all" includes a little caffeine. "We all make choices and compromises," she said.

And I think that's the bottom line: Somehow, somewhere along the way, the feminist idea of women achieving economic and political parity -- an issue

worthy of our energy and attention -- got all mixed up with this notion of not having to make compromises.

I make compromises every day. But I have happy healthy kids, a good job, a kind husband, two beloved and wretched cats and a network of supportive women upon whom I rely for everything from gardening advice to great energy in the workplace. I might not have it all -- but I have more than enough, and sometimes maybe even more than I can manage.

Although, to be honest, I would appreciate a little more vacation sun.

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