Motherhood, the Elephant in the Laboratory: Women Scientists Speak Out

Edited by Emily Monosson.


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Trying to find a balance between motherhood and a science career is a challenge. In this collection of short essays submitted by 34 women scientists and mothers, and commentaries from editor Emily Monosson, we hear first-hand how these women have fashioned their lives and the lives of their families, to make room for their scientific and family ambitions. The essays range from a few short pages to several pages in length and are grouped according to the decade in which the authors started their careers and families. The progression of chapters acknowledges the changes (and in some cases, lack thereof) that have occurred both in the workplace, and in attitudes, over the past four decades.

It is a fascinating read on many levels. Perhaps most startling is the variety of stories and experiences. Admittedly, these women represent a wide cross-section of disciplines ranging from chemistry, to physics, to ecotoxicology, to name just a few. Nonetheless, one might expect that the experiences of mothers in the sciences would be somewhat similar. Indeed, I initially assumed that I would recognize my own story, or something close to it, among the many essays; however, the more I read, the more I realized that perhaps the only commonality is a passion for family and for science.

The essays are revealing and surprisingly candid. There are stories of young graduate students being told that being a mother and scientist are mutually exclusive, of being mistaken for a secretary, of pumping breast milk during an interview break and combining field work with family holidays, of sick kids and lack of sleep, and the guilt-ridden challenges of finding good child care. Despite roadblocks, these women have persevered and have found ways to balance the competing pressures of family and science. To my surprise, this balancing exercise is not simply about finding ways to be more efficient, either at home or at work. Instead, for many women, finding a balance has meant redefining success in science. The idea that a successful scientific career can look very different and need not follow the traditional road to scientific success is an important one and one that deserves thoughtful consideration.

Clearly it is not easy to predict how ones family life and scientific career might be affected by the birth of a child. Different mothers, partners, scientific disciplines, job environments, supervisors, and career stages all give rise to a multitude of different experiences.

The strikingly different paths that these women have chosen was particularly interesting to me simply because I found some choices quite surprising and very different than those I made. I naively thought that because I am a woman, I have kids, and I am a scientist, I would naturally understand the decisions that other women make. Not so. Reading these essays gave me a glimpse into other’s lives, providing new and very different perspectives on motherhood and science. I must admit that when I launched into reading the essays, the feminist within me was secretly thinking, “Aha, this is a book that all men in science should read”. By the time I reached the end of the book, I realized that the insights provided are as valuable to other women as they are to men. I was reminded that my career aspirations may not be the same as the students I supervise, and there is good reason to remain open-minded and receptive to the needs and aspirations of others.

Young women and men starting their careers and families are likely to find these essays both inspirational and useful. Other possibilities and other paths are described that otherwise might not be considered. Being a parent is a demanding job at the best of times, and reading about what has worked and didn’t work for others is great information to have. Equally, from the perspective of an employer or supervisor, there is plenty of insight here to help shape decisions about how we can best support young parents working in our labs.

Woven throughout the many essays is a unifying theme of dedication to science in its many forms. As a society of scientists, we are reminded that the wonder and joy of discovery is enough to keep urging us on, irrespective of the individual challenges that we face in our lives and careers. Emily Monosson has gathered together a collection of essays that are genuine, heartfelt, educational and inspirational, with much to recommend them to any reader.