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ESSAYS

“YOUR WORK WILL BE YOUR MOST FAITHFUL MISTRESS:” THOUGHTS ON WORK-LIFE BALANCE OCCASIONED BY THE LOSS OF PROFESSOR JANE LARSON

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ABSTRACT

“Work-Life” balance has become part of contemporary public discourse. Whether in boardrooms, job interviews, or classrooms, we speak of this balance as a goal that is within our reach and worthy of our pursuit, collectively and individually. To date, the bulk of the discourse on work-life balance presupposes that a balance is obtainable and desirable. This essay challenges that notion. At the heart of my challenge is an alternate perspective on women’s relationship to work, inspired by a seemingly off-hand, yet rich comment made by my dear friend, the late Professor Jane Larson: “Your work will be your most faithful mistress.” The essay begins by describing the shortcomings of the contemporary frameworks invoked when describing women’s struggles with work, family, and accomplishment (“having it all” and “work-life balance”).

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Following this critique, I borrow from the work of Jerome Bruner and Arthur Frank, considering narratives that more accurately reflect the turbulence of motherhood and illustrating the manner in which a relationship to work can serve as a ballast, a solace, a faithful mistress, for those endeavoring to achieve meaningful connections in their personal and their professional lives.

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*"I believe that the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them become so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routes into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative up to the present but directing it into the future."*¹

I. "ON LIES, SECRETS, AND SILENCE:"² WHAT WOMEN DON'T SAY ABOUT
BALANCE

I met Jane Larson at the Chicago Feminist Law Colloquium's first (and as far as I know, only) retreat. We were the youngest women there. At thirty, my life had gone off the rails. I had just left my marriage and was in the process of losing my contract position as a visiting assistant professor. Jane was thirty-two and early on her in tenure-track career at Northwestern Law School.

In preparation for the retreat, the group had read *Composing a Life*, by Mary Catherine Bateson.³ The daughter of renowned anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson, Bateson's book is a memoir of her own professional trajectory, as well as that of four other women.⁴ In it, she posits a new model of assessing personal accomplishments.⁵ Rather than measuring

1. Jerome Bruner, *Life as Narrative*, 71 SOC. RES. 691, 708 (2004).

2. This quote is drawn from the title of a collection of essays, ADRIENNE RICH, ON LIES, SECRETS, AND SILENCE: SELECTED PROSE 1966-1978 (1979).

3. MARY CATHERINE BATESON, *COMPOSING A LIFE* (1990).

4. *Id.* at ix-xi. In addition to writing about her own life, Bateson recounts the stories of her friends Ellen Bassuk, Johnnetta Cole, Alice d'Entremont and Joan Erikson. *Id.*

5. *Id.* at 1-18.

success in terms of professional accomplishments, Bateson suggests extending the time frame so that one might identify multiple types of success at different times in one's life.⁶ If one backed away far enough, she argued, there would be no need for frustration, let alone anger, at the sacrifices and compromises one made because of the conflicting needs and desires of bosses, spouses, and children.⁷

Bateson's book was written in response, or perhaps as a consolation, to her peers - those second wave feminists who had hoped to "have it all" and all at one time. Her book is thick with stories of relationships, children, and work moving from front to back burner over the course of her protagonists' lifetimes.⁸ Her book endeavored to show that women can have it all, or at least can have a lot, but not all at once.⁹ Whether by choice or out of necessity, the obligation to care for others caused work to move from center to periphery, often many times over, in its place within the lives of the women in her book.¹⁰

The resulting "composition," which Bateson endorsed as evidence of a full and creative approach to life, struck Jane and me as being off-key. Single, childless, and untenured, Jane and I challenged our friends to explain why we should settle for, let alone celebrate, what we heard as Bateson's endorsement of work giving way to competing obligations. We asked, "Why was she the one to compromise when her husband needed to work in the Middle East? Why did her academic life have to be circumscribed by his work?" While we were on the topic, we worked our way down to our real concern: Was the reward in being a caretaker worth the sacrifice? What does marriage feel like after twenty years? Is it worth all the trade-offs?

Our friends, those a decade or two older than we were, wandered outside into the early December mist. They had left their kids at home with their partners; they were free for 48 hours. Jane and I took refuge in the hot tub. She waved her wine glass in the air, searching through the steam for the ledge, and proclaimed: "Your work will be your most faithful mistress." And then she laughed and dunked her head.

Only now, over twenty years later, am I ready to continue that conversation with her, as I think I at last understand what she meant. I know now that Jane was right. And I also know that, as has always been true, even the best mistress cannot provide perfect shelter against life's inevitable storms. Jane has been gone for over a year now.

The essay that follows grows out of the conversation I've been having in my head with Jane as I've thought back on our earlier dreams and plans from my midlife perch. At fifty-one, I'm a tenured law professor, married, and the mother/stepmother of five children, the youngest of whom is thirteen. The conversation that has become this essay is so much the worse for Jane's

6. *See id.* at 3-6, 232-241.

7. *See id.* at 232-241.

8. *See generally id.*

9. BATESON, *supra* note 3, at 1-18.

10. *See id.* at 75-93.

absence; her rhetorical grace and wisdom surely would have helped me to better articulate a narrative for all that goes unsaid about the struggle and the joy to be found in nurturing one's work, family, and primary relationships.

Having to say it aloud and alone, in my clumsier voice, hurts. But I am motivated not only by a desire to pay tribute to Jane's influence on my thinking and on my life, but also by a certainty that she, too, would have recognized the danger of silence and the corrosive effect on women and society in general of the existing narratives of "having it all" and "work-life balance."

Part II and Part III of this essay dissect these narratives. In Part IV, I turn to the study of cancer survivors' narratives, finding in their stories a series of metaphors (restitution, chaos, and quest) that better capture the ways in which women describe the challenges they face as parents, partners, and breadwinners. Finally, in Part V, I turn to Jane's comment that work will be a woman's most "faithful mistress," explaining how her metaphor's singular, illicit sweetness so aptly captures the emotional significance of work as it emerges in women's varying narratives of restitution, chaos, and quest.

II. THE "HAVING IT ALL" DELUSION

The phrase "having it all" seems to have been coined by Helen Gurley Brown, longtime editor of *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, who wrote a 1982 follow-up to her earlier best seller, *Sex and the Single Girl*,¹¹ entitled, *Having It All: Love, Success, Sex, Money, Even If You're Starting with Nothing*.¹² The book was not a guide for women seeking to have work, family, spouse, and wealth, all at the same time. Instead, consistent with themes Gurley Brown developed over the course of her lifetime, it was an invitation to women to want more.¹³ As one of her obituaries noted, one of Helen Gurley Brown's principle mantras was: "Don't use men to get what you want in life – get it for yourself."¹⁴

Over the past thirty years, the meaning of the phrase "having it all" has moved far beyond Gurley Brown's self-help advice, and has become shorthand, at least in second generation feminist circles, for the failed expectations of those who came of age with an expectation that they would be able to enjoy their work, their children, and their marriages simultaneously and in equal measure.¹⁵ Bateson's book sought to engage that generation, providing advice

11. HELEN GURLEY BROWN, *SEX AND THE SINGLE GIRL* (1962).

12. HELEN GURLEY BROWN, *HAVING IT ALL: LOVE, SUCCESS, SEX, MONEY, EVEN IF YOU'RE STARTING WITH NOTHING* (1982).

13. *Id.*

14. Sail Hughes, *Helen Gurley Brown: How to Have It All*, *THE GUARDIAN* (Aug. 14, 2012), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/aug/14/helen-gurley-brown-cosmopolitan-sex>.

15. See Deborah Fallows, *How the 'Having It All' Debate Has Changed over the Last 30 Years*, *THE ATLANTIC* (Oct. 29, 2012, 8:04 AM), <http://theatlantic.com/saxes/archive/2012/10/how-the-having-it-all-debate-has-changed-over-the-last-30-years/264110/> (chronicling the shifts in the "having it all" debate over the last three decades and discussing the evolving meaning of the phrase).

to those who somehow felt they had missed the mark when any one of those factors seemed lacking from their lives.¹⁶ Today, the phrase “having it all” feels less like an exhortation to a generation of young women than it does like an indictment for the selfish or naïve. Only a fool would expect to have it all at the same time.

In June 2012, Professor Anne-Marie Slaughter called this tired narrative back into circulation in *The Atlantic* magazine article entitled “*Why Women Still Can’t Have it All*.”¹⁷ In it, she describes what she perceived as the gender-related struggles she encountered during her two-year tenure as the first woman director of policy planning at the State Department.¹⁸ Specifically, she explains that her status as a mother led to her decision not to seek renewal of her contract at the end of her term.¹⁹

Her article ignored the gender-neutral reasons why many sane adults would have elected the same course of action. Renewing her contract would have meant relinquishing her job as a tenured professor at Princeton, in addition to requiring two more years of frequent travel and life away from home.²⁰ By casting her problem as an example of why “Women Can’t Have it All,” Slaughter suggests that a father might have opted to stay in the frenzy of the government job, perhaps even giving up his job as a tenured Princeton professor in order to serve another two years with the administration.²¹ Maybe some fathers would have done so, but absent proof to the contrary, I do not buy it.

Her essay irritated me not only because of its questionable assertion that women, unlike men, cannot work high-power jobs when they have children.²² Its more toxic feature is its admonition to women setting out to pursue a career, hoping to have a meaningful relationship with a partner, and expecting, sooner or later, to build a family. To those readers, her advice seems to be: “Don’t bother expecting too much from your career; if I can’t do it, no one can.”

16. BATESON, *supra* note 3, at 6 (“The model of an ordinary successful life that is held up for young people is one of early decision and commitment, often to an educational preparation that launches a single rising trajectory...these assumptions have not been valid for many of history’s most creative people, and they are increasingly inappropriate today.”).

17. Anne-Marie Slaughter, *Why Women Still Can’t Have It All*, THE ATLANTIC (July/Aug. 2012), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020>.

18. *Id.*

19. *Id.* (“When people asked why I had left government, I explained that I’d come home...because of my desire to be with my family and my conclusion that juggling high-level government work with the needs of two teenage boys was not possible.”).

20. *Id.*

21. *See id.* Slaughter relates a conversation with a female colleague with children, who “had chosen to move them from California to D.C. when she got her job, which meant her husband commuted back to California regularly. I told her how difficult I was finding it to be away from my son when he clearly needed me. Then I said, “When this is over, I’m going to write an op-ed titled ‘Women Can’t Have It All.’” *Id.*

22. *See id.*

I think Slaughter's essay is interesting, though, because it unwittingly tells an entirely different story—one that is hiding in plain sight. And, as renowned psychologist Jerome Bruner has noted, "Any story one may tell about anything is better understood by considering other possible ways in which it can be told."²³ The story I heard begins in the first paragraph of her article:

I could not stop thinking about my 14 year-old son, who had started eighth grade three weeks before and was already resuming what had become his pattern of skipping homework, disrupting classes, failing math, and tuning out any adult who tried to reach him.²⁴

Anne-Marie Slaughter had a long-distance job at a time when her teenage child was struggling.²⁵ I heard this part of her story as a mother of five and as a veteran of several bouts of kids in crisis. When a child is struggling in the way Slaughter described above, his or her needs trigger the non-negotiable demands of parenthood. The obligation to step in and help your suffering child is not gendered; there is no time to assess fault, nor is it productive. Instead, it is a moment to gather all available hands on deck.

Like many parents I know, Slaughter endeavored to work at her normal pace through the simmering months of her son's struggle, hoping it would pass, and that her child would right his course and find less self-destructive ways of coping with the misery of adolescence.²⁶ I might have done the same myself, even if I was not working in my "dream job."²⁷ It's no fun to acknowledge that your child is miserable, and that you have no idea how to make it all better.

Slaughter let things play out just as a powerful man might have. She finished her two-year commitment, relying on her partner to hold the household together while she pursued her professional obligations and dreams.²⁸ Of course she felt torn by the choice she made—but I suspect she would have felt torn no matter what choice she made. When her term was over, she returned to her tenured post at one of the top universities in the world, where she could also engage in the hard work of trying to help her son.²⁹

23. Bruner, *supra* note 1, at 709.

24. Slaughter, *supra* note 17.

25. *Id.*

26. *See id.*

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* ("I had always assumed that if I could get a foreign-policy job in the State Department or the White House while my party was in power, I would stay the course as long as I had the opportunity to do work I loved.")

29. *Id.* "When people asked why I had left government, I explained that I'd come home not only because of Princeton's rules (after two years of leave, you lose your tenure), but also because of my desire to be with my family." *Id.* Slaughter hastens to add, "I have not exactly left the ranks of full-time career women: I teach a full course load; write regular print and online columns on foreign policy; give 40 to 50 speeches a year; appear regularly on TV and radio; and am working on a new academic book." *Id.*

I make no judgments about how she lived out this particular phase of her life. It is worth noting, though, the ways in which Slaughter's career enabled her to live through the early months of her son's struggles with integrity, helping the world in the way in which she was trained, and perhaps also helping her family by modeling professional responsibility and self-care.³⁰ Others might have quit. Others might have stayed on and re-upped. Slaughter split the difference, opting to take a two-year term, and then to return home to her family and to her job.³¹

By framing her departure from Washington, DC, as a "women can't have it all" narrative, she reinforced a lie. In the long run, as we know from Bateson, if not simply from observation, no one "has it all," or at least not at any one time. The vast majority of humans have connections to others—connections that enrich our lives, connections that require nurturing, connections that force us to make trade-offs when determining how we spend our time, or how time spends us.³²

If there is any lingering benefit to be found in the notion of "having it all," it lies in the extent to which it has inspired women to cultivate connections on multiple fronts—work, that ever faithful mistress, as well as home. But living with more connections, rather than less, is not in itself a prescription for how to manage one's life. Nor does simply noting that one can have it all so long as one views things over the long course of time describe the way it feels, in any given moment, to have competing connections vying for our time. It is this struggle that has led to the adoption of the even more troubling narrative of "work-life balance."

III. THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Over the past decade or so, the gender-specific talk of women wanting to "have it all" has been displaced by a new discourse in "work-life balance."³³ The term work-life balance irks me for at least two reasons.³⁴

30. *See id.*

31. Slaughter, *supra* note 17.

32. For example, my friend Jonathan, the father of Jane's son, did yeoman's work in raising their son during Jane's illness, while also attending to his own work in U.S. and international labor rights law.

33. Unlike "having it all," the pursuit of work-life balance has spawned a host of cottage industries. It has spawned corporate endeavors targeting employers. *See, e.g.*, WORKLIFEBALANCE.COM. <http://www.worklifebalance.com/> (last visited Apr. 08, 2013). It is advocated by medical experts. For example, see *Work-Life Balance: Tips To Reclaim Control*, MAYO CLINIC (July 12, 2012), <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/work-life-balance/WL00056>, for the Mayo clinic's white paper on the subject. It is embraced by international organizations as a useful marker for measuring wellbeing in countries around the world. *See, e.g.*, *Work-Life Balance*, THE ORG FOR ECON. COOPERATION & DEV. <http://www.oecdbetterlifeindex.org/topics/work-life-balance/> (last visited Apr. 08, 2013) (ranking the work-life balance in various countries). There is even an organization devoted to achieving work-life balance for lawyers. WORKLIFELAW, UC HASTINGS COLL. OF THE LAW (2012), <http://www.worklifelaw.org/Staff.html>.

First, I dislike the term work-life balance because it sets up work and life in opposition to one another. Work-life balance conjures up a battle of work versus life. When framed as such, work becomes the enemy; by definition it subtracts from life. And yet, for those who like at least some part of their work, there is overlap, not opposition, between the need or desire to care for themselves and for others.

Second, as a long-time yoga beginner, I know one thing for certain: Balance is not a permanent state of being. It comes and goes, and the best we can do is to take note of the rare and resplendent moments in which all parts of our lives seem to be in balance. The work-life balance narrative seems to suggest the existence of a specific set point, and invites women to struggle to find that point, and perhaps to blame themselves, rather than external structures and unrealistic expectations, when they are feeling out of balance. If there were a secret to making balance a permanent feature in our lives, someone would have patented it by now.

Instead, flux is the nature of things. For the vast majority of us, at any given time, only some of our various obligations and relationships are going well. We are almost never firing on all cylinders, just as we are never fully in balance. When I was pregnant, I remember one of my mentors, Professor Martha Fineman, attempting to warn me of the limited nature of our ability to experience the “good” in our lives. “If you consider the three primary connections in your life: to work, to partner and to kids,” she said, “know that you can have two of the three at any given time. And even that goal will take work.”³⁵ If one pursues the elusive goal of finding the perfect work-life balance, one can too easily focus on the cylinders that are not firing, and miss the joy, love, and passion emanating from the connections that are working well.

In the end, then, invoking the work-life balance terminology weaves falsehood into the way we live our lives, and into the way we talk about living

34. I’m not alone in disliking the work-life balance terminology, and in struggling with its gendered subtext. The Center for Work-Life Policy (CWLP), a New York City-based think tank that “undertakes research and works with employers to design, promote, and implement workplace policies that increase productivity and enhance personal/family well-being and general work-life balance,” recently decided to rename its enterprise, reframing its goals while still avoiding gendered language, by calling itself the Center for Talent Innovation. See Center for Talent Innovation, NAT’L COUNCIL FOR RESEARCH ON WOMEN, <http://www.ncrw.org/member-organizations/center-work-life-policy> (last visited Dec. 19, 2012). The center was founded by renowned author and public thinker, Sylvia Ann Hewlett, whose books include *OFF-RAMPS AND ON-RAMPS: KEEPING TALENTED WOMEN ON THE ROAD TO SUCCESS* (2007). *Id.*

35. I didn’t heed her advice by making peace with the two-thirds approach to my primary connections. It seemed defeatist to me then, and even today, I still struggle with my yearning for all these pieces of my life to be good, at once. So even though I know the mission to be a fool’s errand and am writing this essay to explain why it is so, I’ll confess that I haven’t escaped the expectation that there should be more. As one of my friends who shares my struggles often says: “Take my advice; I’m not using it.”

them. And the story we tell about our lives matters because, as Professor Jerome Bruner notes: “In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives.”³⁶ If for this reason alone, it is important to move beyond the broken narratives of “having it all” and “balance” when we describe how it feels to be a woman with a career, fulfilling relationship and a life thick with connections to children, siblings, parents, and friends.

IV. ALTERNATE NARRATIVES FOR WOMEN AND THEIR WORK

In the following section, I explore three versions of cancer narratives that I believe more accurately capture the way women describe their lives than do the notions of “balancing” or “having it all.” I have borrowed these narratives from Arthur Frank, whose book, *The Wounded Storyteller*, identifies three narratives invoked by individuals who have faced serious illness: restitution, chaos, or quest.³⁷

Restitution stories attempt to outdistance mortality by rendering illness transitory. Chaos stories are sucked into the undertow of illness. . . . Quest stories meet suffering head on; they accept illness and seek to use it. . . . [T]he quest is defined by the ill person’s belief that something is to be gained through the experience.³⁸

These narratives resonate outside of the illness context, and once one is attuned to them, one finds many people using one or another of them to describe their lives, or at least a current predicament in their life.³⁹ Below, I describe the ways in which women use versions of these same narratives when describing their lives, particularly when undergoing or recovering from a time of stress.

A. *The Restitution Narrative*

The restitution narrative is a three part (beginning, middle and end) story that consists of some variation on the following theme, paraphrased from Arthur Frank: “Yesterday I was fine, today I’m not, but tomorrow I’ll be fine again.”⁴⁰ These are not stories told by those who are in the midst of a crisis. Rather, they tend to be hopeful summaries offered up by those anticipating, or

36. Bruner, *supra* note 1, at 694.

37. ARTHUR W. FRANK, *THE WOUNDED STORYTELLER: BODY, ILLNESS, AND ETHICS* (1995).

38. *Id.* at 115.

39. A simple Internet search for the book title yielded over 2,080 articles citing to it in English alone. See *THE WOUNDED STORYTELLER: BODY, ILLNESS, AND ETHICS* Search Results, GOOGLE SCHOLAR, <http://scholar.google.com/> (search “The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics”) (last visited December 13, 2012).

40. FRANK, *supra* note 37, at 77. (Frank actually says, “Yesterday I was healthy, today I’m sick, but tomorrow I’ll be healthy again”).

recently having recovered from a disease that might return.⁴¹ The restitution narrative, Frank notes, “not only reflects a ‘natural’ desire to get well and stay well,” but also is the product of a particular cultural expectation.⁴² In the case of the cancer patients, for instance, Frank notes how hospitals, treatment providers, advertisements, and support groups model the “everything is back to normal” narrative for their consumers.⁴³

Anne Marie Slaughter’s story of her work in D.C. might be read as a restitution narrative. “Everything was fine,” she might have begun, “before I went to work in Washington at a demanding new job. Then, things fell apart. But now that I have returned home, things are once again fine.” The details in her story fit neatly into the three part of the restitution narrative, her son becoming the symbol for the way things fell apart when she faced overwhelming demands on her time, given her sense of responsibility to others.

The restitution narrative is familiar to those who work with deadlines. The sense of things being fine until it’s crunch time, and then resolving once again after the deadline passes, describes the semester for many students and teachers. Of course, it is equally apt for the world of lawyers and many other professionals. The important thing to note about the restitution narrative when applied to women’s lives is that, perhaps unlike illness, one inevitably will return to a place of chaos. Time and again, things will fall apart. A child, a parent, a partner, or you yourself will become ill; a new deadline will emerge; you will become disenchanted with your spouse, or your life, or your friends. Change happens. And when we are in the midst of change, the narrative is one of chaos, rather than restitution.

B. The Chaos Narrative

The chaos narrative as Frank describes it is a misnomer, in that it is not a narrative, but rather an anti-narrative.⁴⁴ “Lived chaos,” he notes, “makes reflection, and consequently storytelling, impossible.”⁴⁵ Chaos stories lack narrative order; rather than one thing leading to another, the storyteller is living in chaos—they are in their own story, and they cannot imagine life getting better.⁴⁶ Frank’s example of a “chaos narrative” is drawn from an interview with a chronically ill patient who is struggling with many family problems, including her live-in mother’s Alzheimer’s disease:

And if I’m trying to get dinner ready and I’m already feeling bad, she’s in front of the refrigerator. Then she goes to put her hand on the stove and I got the fire on. And then she’s in front of the microwave

41. *See id.* at 77-78.

42. *Id.* at 78.

43. *Id.* at 78-79.

44. *Id.* at 97-98.

45. *Id.* at 98.

46. FRANK, *supra* note 37 at 97-98.

and then she's in front of the silverware drawer. And—and if I send her out she gets mad at me. And then it's awful. That's when I have a really, a really bad time.⁴⁷

A restitution narrative does not work when one's life is in chaos because in a state of chaos, there is no firm place to stand and see the road back to stability. When we are in true times of crisis, be they a product of joy, as in the birth of a child, or devastation, such as the death of a loved one, we cannot tell stories at all. Instead, we send dispatches from the front lines of our battles.

Consider the way a mother may tell stories in the days and perhaps weeks following the arrival of her newborn. What is characteristic about new mothers' stories is the “and then, and then, and then,” staccato style of reportage. Reflection becomes an unaffordable luxury when one's life is in chaos. There may be longer fragments of narrative, such as the story of labor and delivery. There may be short descriptions about other family members, about hunger, about pain, or about immediate needs. But at least for the first week or two, unless she is getting phenomenal around-the-clock support, there will not be a coherent three-part story about what this new child means in the context of her life.

The good news about chaos is that, for the majority of us, it passes. It is too painful to live in chaos any longer than one must. My sense is that all humans, and surely all women with jobs and families, experience chaos from time to time. To be sure, many people live lives marked by almost unremitting chaos. Leaving aside those whose lives are circumscribed by chaos, external or internal, I want to address the role of chaos in the lives of “healthy” women.

Under a theory of work-life balance, chaos emerges as a result of imbalance—moreover, we may be seen as having brought chaos upon ourselves as the result of bad decisions made by trying to do too much. By contrast, we learn from Arthur Frank that chaos may come of its own accord, entering one's life for reasons having nothing to do with choice or desert.⁴⁸

In thinking about how chaos narratives end, I am reminded of various techniques used in cognitive behavioral therapy to help one gain perspective in times of crisis.⁴⁹ One can, for example, respond to stress by ranking the pain it is causing on a scale of 1 to 10.⁵⁰ Then, after an interval of just say five minutes, re-rank the pain. And then do it again. Inevitably, one will notice that the amount of pain shifts over time. Once one recognizes that the pain is not a

47. *Id.* at 99 (citations omitted).

48. *Id.* at 97-99.

49. Numerous websites describe techniques similar to this one, explaining how they can be useful mechanisms for confronting cognitive distortions. *See, e.g., Free Downloadable Therapy Worksheets & CBT Tools*, GET SELF HELP, <http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/freedownloads2.htm> (last visited January 3, 2013).

50. *See Continuum*, GET SELF HELP (2009) <http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/docs/Continuum.pdf>, for an example of a “continuum” worksheet.

constant, one can step back from it and respond to it with discernment, knowing that it will stop at some point. And once it stops, one can tell a story about it.

C. The Quest Narrative

An alternative to the restitution and chaos narratives, in Frank's theoretical framework, is the quest narrative. The structure of the quest story differs from that of the restitution story in at least two ways. First, the narrative structure is distinct in that rather than moving from a hypothetical idyllic past into and through a story of externally imposed stress or chaos, the quest storyteller tells a story about herself and how she has grown or changed.⁵¹ Perhaps the most important distinction between the quest narrative and other ways of describing one's life is that the quest storyteller is the focus of the narrative; she plays an active role, treating challenging present circumstances as occasions for reflection on the past and as explanations for how things are now.⁵²

The quest narrative's classic theme is one of strength derived from adversity.⁵³ As one of Frank's interviewees stated, "I would never have *chosen* to be taught this way but I like the changes in me. I guess I had to go to the edge to get there."⁵⁴

Many women invoke quest narratives when describing their lives on relatively good days. Once the chaos has passed, it is possible to look back on it and to notice the small truth in the old aphorism that "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger." Any number of challenging events, once overcome, may be rendered as quest narratives. Dissertation stories often take this form: "I learned how to write by forcing myself to sit at the desk, first thing in the morning, and write four pages. If it weren't for that routine, I'd never have finished my thesis."⁵⁵ I invoke quest narratives, on my "good mom" days, when describing all that I learned about mothering by becoming a stepmother to three children when I met my partner.

Quest narratives have the virtue of honoring the storyteller as an active agent in her life. For the woman whose life is a complex web of relationships and obligations, telling a quest story permits her to recognize herself as being a person of importance at the center of the web. The problem with the quest narrative, though, is that it presupposes a full victory or recovery—an arrival at a place of comfort, albeit with scars. The quest story is too heroic by half; it conceals the agony of chaos or forced compromises made in order to arrive safely at the other side of adversity, and, in the case of women's endeavors to

51. FRANK, *supra* note 37, at 120-121.

52. *See id.* at 121 (describing Audre Lorde's memoir/quest style writing about breast cancer).

53. *See id.*

54. *Id.* at 128.

55. Interview with Paula Dempsey (2004); Interview with Ariella Radwin (2011).

meet the needs of competing relationships with work, family, and friends, its narrative frame suggests that one has won a war, when in reality, it likely was only a battle.

V. CULTIVATING A “FAITHFUL MISTRESS” AS A PRESCRIPTION FOR LIVING FULLY

The beauty of applying Arthur Frank’s narratives to the challenges faced by women who are enmeshed in lives thick with connection to others is that they open up a broader set of ways for telling our stories. Struggle is acknowledged as part of the package—it is inevitable. Life stories are largely about chaos and what it makes of us, or perhaps what we make of it. The goal is no longer elusive (as in having it all, or achieving balance), but instead, the ability to survive challenges. And it is in this spirit that I now understand Jane’s linkage of work to the notion of a faithful mistress.

Jane defined work in the broadest sense—one’s work is one’s passion; it is that which feeds one’s soul; it is the way in which one manifests one’s truest self in the world. To the extent that Jane was referring to paid work, her definition is unabashedly elitist. An exceptionally small percentage of the world’s population has the luxury to consider work as a source of passion and pleasure in their lives. It makes little sense to expect a woman locked into a minimum-wage job with no benefits to experience a passionate connection to her work. Those who get paid to pursue their passion generally are the beneficiaries of a good deal of luck, as well as of a great deal of effort. Perhaps Virginia Woolf described it best, in her renowned essay “A Room of One’s Own.”⁵⁶ Responding to a request to speak about women and fiction, she began by offering what she termed “an opinion upon one minor point — a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”⁵⁷

And yet, everyone possesses the capacity to work in the world in a way that captures the sense of passion and meaning implicit in Jane’s metaphor. Each year, thousands of American women graduate from professional programs and face the daunting question of how to pursue their newfound workforce skills in a way that will be compatible with their desire to have a family and a partner.

At the heart of Jane’s insight that work can be a faithful mistress was her belief that a connection to one’s passion can nurture and sustain you when chaos comes into your life. Divorce, children, moves, illnesses—all of these challenges and more may come your way. We do young women a profound disservice if we advise them that they may avoid what are, in fact, inevitable challenges by limiting their participation in the workforce.

Similarly unsound is the exhortation implicit in Slaughter’s article, and indeed in much of the messaging of the work-life balance movement, urging women to limit their professional aspirations so that they can better “balance”

56. VIRGINIA WOOLF, *A ROOM OF ONE’S OWN* (1929).

57. *Id.* at 4.

the needs of their families. This prescription not only is unproven, but also dangerous in that it endorses the vain pursuit of balance, rather than some other strategy, such as alternating priorities, as the best way for women (not men) to live.

I realize now the wisdom of Mary Catherine Bateson encouraging us to broaden the lens by which we judge our success, taking note of the rewards offered by pursuing rich connections in all aspects of our lives: family, partner, friendship, and work.⁵⁸ Of course, one should not expect it will be possible, let alone easy, to enjoy all of these connections simultaneously. At the same time, though, there is good reason to believe that a woman deeply invested in tending to her family might also be best served, in the long run, by finding ways to nurture her work-related muse.

I hear Jane's words coming down through the decades of carpooling, of committee work, of family dinners, of the great many good and mercifully few terrible times in my family life. My work has been there for me like a faithful mistress. She held up a different mirror for me when I was covered in spit up, permitting me to escape, if only for an hour, into my identity as a teacher. As my most faithful mistress, my work forgave my long periods of neglect and returned to my side even when I had only five or ten minutes to scratch down some thoughts in my journal or to re-work my lecture notes.

The choice of the word "mistress" is an interesting one. It is not value-neutral. When I explained my desire to have more children to my partner, I couched it in economic terms. "I want a diversified portfolio," I told him, not knowing whether family, work, or something else entirely would be my blue-chip stock. But looking back on the trade-offs I made, I think the concept of a mistress better suits the way that my work has served and sustained me. The notion of mistress reflects the extent to which my relationship to work is limited, as it always will be, by my connections to others. Like a mistress, the pleasure I derive from my work sometimes feels illicit, even when the pleasure it generates is authentic.

It is vital to note that one does not marry one's mistress. If one does, sooner or later the passion gives way to something new—companionable love, quotidian drudgery, or perhaps a little of both. One keeps a faithful mistress precisely because of the limited, yet deeply rewarding nature of the relationship. A mistress alone is not enough to sustain one's life. All she can do is offer you love, succor, passion, faith, and occasional joy. And perhaps more important than all of those gifts is the gift she gives unwittingly by strengthening you for the struggles you surely will face, if your aim is to live a life of meaning and connection to others.

58. BATESON, *supra* note 3, at 2, 233-241.