

An Improbable Outcome

by Audrey A. Gendreau
audrey.gendreau@saintleo.edu

Introduction

This paper explains how an incident refocused my goals and my career choices. My career ambitions and choices encountered my maternal instincts; I decided the right work-life balance for me was to choose a career path that gave our children higher priority than any one particular job. Consequently, this emotional state guided me to make what might be considered in our society to be peculiar choices. Oddly enough, my choice to put life-work in balance caused an improbable outcome -- I earned a Ph.D. with a concentration in information security that I otherwise would not have pursued. The unplanned sequence of events that lead to a Ph.D. started about one year after I had our third child.

The Incident that Changed my Direction



Figure 1 Portrait
[Ninh 2001]

I had the perfect job. I was working for myself as a program analyst during the dot-com boom, and I really enjoyed it. At least I did until the day that I misplaced our Figure 1 Portrait. I have since found out that this is a not-that-uncommon occurrence! Our Figure 1 Portrait was one of three boys that were each about two years apart in age. Juggling work while raising three small children creates a lifestyle that is crowded with a multitude of unrelated tasks. Moreover, I soon discovered that for a working couple, two children were manageable, but that three was the tipping point into a less manageable structure, and is much more difficult. Since I was self-employed and not wealthy enough to afford a personal assistant, au pair, or nanny, the bulk of shuttling kids to daycare and school, etc. fell to me. One day, as I dropped off our oldest son at kindergarten, I only had the Figure 1 Portrait with me. Our middle son was sick, and had stayed home with his father. I remember that particular day that I felt somewhat "lighter" due to the absence of the middle child. As I walked my oldest child to the kindergarten class, I started talking to another mother and forgot momentarily that the Figure 1 Portrait was waiting in the car. Luckily, it was a cool morning and within seconds I realized that I had never taken the Figure 1 Portrait out of the car! This caused an enormous feeling of panic when for a few moments I did not know where he was. Was he in the car? Or was he with his father and sick brother at home? While the Figure 1 Portrait was fine, I wasn't; I realized I was stretched too thin; it was time to shut down the business and rethink the career.

First Step: Terminate Burgeoning Career

I terminated my burgeoning career to focus on quality time, and raising our three boys. However, this first step toward the upcoming improbable outcome was not an easy one for me to take. I felt like I was at the top of my game as a software developer; I had a good start on building a client base, my reputation was growing, and I loved what I was doing! Therefore, to come to terms with what I had to do was not easy; but I knew what my priorities were, for me and my family; it was difficult, I really had to wrestle with my ambitions and my love of programming; but for me this was a critical decision worth making. However, it did not mean I had to stop programming – I did it for fun! I went through one programming book after another and actually became Java certified, which was my entry back into the job market... but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Ironically, it became clear that raising three children on a one income family was hardly a realistic expectation in today's economy. Therefore, after staying at home with our children for less than three years we had depleted our savings and I needed to find work again; it just had to be work that worked for a family!

Second Step: Substitute Teacher for Grades K through 12

Determined to be with our children after they got off from school, I tried to substitute teach. In the state of Florida, depending on your education at the time, it was possible to qualify for a temporary license to teach. With a bachelor's degree in geological sciences and a master's degree in computer science, I was approved to teach the physical sciences, math, and computer courses. I had never considered teaching as an occupation that I wanted to pursue. However, at this point in my life I valued how a teacher's schedule was aligned with most children's schedules. It was one of the toughest jobs that I ever had. Not knowing the subject matter, a substitute teacher is expected to walk into a classroom and take over the lesson plans left by the full time teacher. Moreover, substitute teachers are not held in high regard by anyone; and thus, are treated accordingly. So, it is not surprising that I quickly decided not to pursue becoming a teacher in grades K-12. However, working as a substitute teacher was a humbling experience and an important second step toward the quite improbable outcome.

Third Step: Adjunct at Junior College

I decided to investigate an older group of students: community college! I would go to work after my husband got home at night, and at some level, I could practice my profession. Being a bit of an introvert, it took a lot of courage for me to get in front of adults to teach a simple course on Microsoft Applications; before class, I would get anxious: was I prepared enough? To compensate for my anxiety I would over-prepare and after some success my anxiety lessened. In time, the babies grew into boys and I needed

the evenings free for the children's activities. Again, with their needs guiding my next step, I applied to teach for a weekend program at a local private university. By this time, I had some experience teaching, and felt I could do a good job. However, by now I was bored with teaching Microsoft Office products. For fun and to complement teaching, I started taking online graduate courses. I really didn't expect to earn a Ph.D., it was more of a continuation of my hobby. As the kids grew and started playing soccer on Saturday mornings, this weekend work soon got in the way of the family again. By this time all three of the children were in elementary school, and therefore, I decided that it was time for me to go back to work full time with an institution that would allow me to have a schedule that fit our family's needs.

Final Step: Full-time Instructor at University

In 2005, instead of the dot-com boom I had experienced before, I left the software and programming industry, it was the aftermath of the dot-com bust. However, I was eager to get back into the game, I had kept up my skills and finding a job as a programmer analyst was not hard. I landed a job earning about a third of what I had been making before as an entrepreneur programmer, but with three young children I needed flexibility that the prospective employer would not grant me. So, again guided by my maternal instincts I turned down the software developer job and applied for a full-time Instructor position at the same private University where I was working on the weekends. Oddly enough, this staff position required that I was working on a Ph.D. This meant that the Ph.D. was no longer a hobby, but a requirement for a job that gave me the same schedule as my children; I would need to handle a full teaching schedule, my family's needs, and work long hours as a PhD student. What was it like? I compare working on a PhD like running a marathon. In the beginning you are invigorated and self-confident but the process wears you down and then toward the end it is the light at the end of the tunnel that keeps you going, each step feeling like it is a thousand steps. There were times that I would have quit had it not been for my children. After watching them watch me, their mother, struggling toward the degree, it became important to me that they had a positive legacy of their mother finishing what she had started. It took eight years, but last January I graduated with a Ph.D. in computer information systems with a concentration in information security. In conclusion, I put myself in roles that were not always comfortable for me, but which enabled me to achieve unimaginable things, and I kept my commitment to my family.

About the Author

Audrey A. Gendreau, Assistant Professor of Computer Science at Saint Leo University, is a mother of three children with a newly issued Doctorate. She recently completed her Ph.D. in Computer Information Systems with a concentration in Information Security at Nova Southeastern University. When she is not working on her research on sensor networks, she enjoys ocean kayaking, biking, and - as time permits - volunteering her computing skills to help friends and nonprofits.



More information about her is available at <http://www.linkedin.com/pub/audrey-gendreau/a/806/148>.

References

Ninh. (2001). Portrait [Pencil drawing]. Wesley Chapel, Florida: Private Residence.