



**Big Moves:
Navigating Work/Life Changes While Nurturing a Perspective of Care**

By Rachel E. Bauer

How do we care for ourselves when faced with major change and uncertainty? How do we even begin to look past basic survival and get through one day to the next when we feel unmoored and worried about what each new day will bring? The year 2020 brought a lot of change and uncertainty. I became a new parent and started my first year at a new institution within a few months of each other. In August 2020—five months into the pandemic—my little family and I drove halfway across the country to start a new position in Connecticut as a lecturer and Coordinator of Academic Theatre Arts at Sacred Heart University. My daughter turned three months old the day we left our home for a new one we had only seen via video chat with a realtor we had only met via text. As such, I've felt restless most of this past year. Rootless in this new space. I am privileged to have a roof over my head, the support of my spouse, and an income. But I still do not know my new home. I don't know my new town. Due to social distancing, I barely know my new colleagues. We've spent so much time indoors, by ourselves, that I still need the GPS to go most places. Most days felt like a long fight to get to the next. With the uncertainty of a pandemic and the newness of the past year, I spent much of my time worrying about the proverbial next shoe and when it would drop.

The uncertainty of contract labor and the potential for frequent relocation makes many contingent faculty feel rootless. Even without a pandemic and the resulting economic struggles for many institutions worldwide, this is the reality. After all, many contingent faculty face these big life and work changes every year, with or without a pandemic. Covid-19 has wreaked havoc on academia, so it's not a surprise that the conversations around security and contingency have increased. And with the number of tenure-track positions shrinking each and every year, conversations around contingency in our field are not going away. As a profession, we are well aware of, and give frequent lip service to, the employment struggles faced by faculty in contingent lines and graduate students who are entering or about to enter the professoriate. However, the struggles of contingent faculty began well before 2020. I am lucky to work in a department where I feel valued and at a university that treats NTT faculty with respect. Unfortunately, that is not the case for far too many others in my position. It is hard to feel stable and secure enough to focus on care when you only have so much control over your future and employment.

Admittedly, talking about finding time for care while navigating contingency can feel a bit disingenuous. Contingency does not always allow for the feeling of comfort that promotes our ability to take time to care for ourselves. Terms like “self-care” are often associated with financial comfort and the ability to spend on massages, shopping trips, vacations, and other luxuries. And then there is the added guilt for taking time and money to do seemingly unnecessary things—taking time for the “frivolous” instead of attending to the needs of others. All this has left me thinking: is this what self-care must be? Is this the only way we can care? Or is there something missing?

For me, this feeling of uncertainty is juxtaposed, of course, with my other recent, new labor: parenting my first child. Like many other faculty parents, or simply parents in general, the pandemic brought seemingly insurmountable challenges. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*'s timely essay, "Covid-19 Has Robbed Faculty Parents of Time for Research. Especially Mothers.," strikes a powerful chord with women struggling to balance academia and motherhood.¹ A similar posting appeared on *Inside Higher Ed* in August 2020, with the tagline: "Faculty parents are once again being asked to perform a miracle: Get their students and their own kids through the semester in one piece."² These pieces, and many more, remind us of the burdens placed upon us by the pandemic, for which there is little support. I found myself walking an exceedingly fine line trying to learn a new institution, do well in my first year, and care for my infant daughter while attempting to stave off exhaustion. However, this is not unique to me and my experiences. For me, the care of others (including children, significant others, parents, siblings, etc.) often takes precedent over care of self.

I tend to put the needs of others first, even when they may not need it, and that comes at a cost. Even with a conscious effort to care for myself, I was still giving my free time to others, prioritizing their time to relax and recharge while I ran myself into the ground. After all, I was not the only one in my household struggling with the realities of a pandemic. I'd lie to myself that my mostly quiet commute home with an audiobook was enough. It wasn't. And I did it to myself.

¹ Emma Pettit, "Covid-19 Has Robbed Faculty Parents of Time for Research. Especially Mothers.," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/covid-19-has-robbed-faculty-parents-of-time-for-research-especially-mothers>.

² Colleen Flaherty, "'Babar in the Room': Faculty Parents Are Once Again Being Asked to Perform a Miracle," *Inside Higher Ed*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/08/11/faculty-parents-are-once-again-being-asked-perform-miracle>.

Some of the factors that led to this reality were my expectations and visions of how I *should* be as a mother. Motherhood, I thought, meant care for oneself was almost a complete afterthought, a non-priority. My experience of becoming a mother during that time has left me searching. Am I allowed to think of myself, and if so, how do I do that now? Is there something that will give me peace while providing a bit of rejuvenation for my soul? How do I practice it without feeling the crushing burden of mom-guilt? Or perhaps, I am looking for care that helped the old me, not this new me: educator, artist, scholar, wife, daughter...mother.

For the last year, I have been trying to take back my power, to lay my roots, even if they grow slowly. A dear friend said this to me, and I have been trying to live by it, "We have no other choice but to go forward. The paths we choose are ours. We can claim them, or we can let them claim us." I could let the stress, work, and fear swallow me, or I could claim this time, even if it were rough. To be honest, most days I felt out of control of my self-care, as I focused on my family, my students, and my job. But other days, the ones I think were most successful, were the ones where I gave myself room to breathe, when I claimed the time I had, even if it *was* the drive home from campus, for myself. "The paths we choose are ours." Whether I choose to stop, leave, or continue makes me no less worthy or valuable. To remember oneself or the value one brings with them is easier said than done, right? In this conversation, my friend added, "We cannot internalize external things." Well, I thought to myself, I do that all the time! So, how do I stop? How can we keep ourselves focused and balanced and moving forward when all feels out of control? How do we claim our paths? How do we keep from internalizing those external things? How do we feel in control when we have none? Or how do we let go of the control we *think* we should have?

While I feel like I am still figuring out care for myself at this historic time, I can say that the care of and for others has given me peace. That is not the stereotypical self-care marketed to us all on a daily, if not hourly, basis. If anything, this pandemic has reified what is essential. My daughter. My students who rely on me. My world around me. I'm choosing to lean into paying it forward and finding care for myself while building relationships and finding mutual support with those around me. Perhaps we need to put down the Instagram feeds of perfect parenthood and reexamine what self-care is in this moment. After all, what we call care *now* does not have to be care *forever*.

For me, finding time to focus on giving and receiving care has been the path forward. I claimed my way by moving forward with a new perspective of care. Full of care for ourselves and others, but also advocating more carefully and purposefully regarding our perspectives on our worth—visions of ourselves, which are our own to cultivate.

While I have not yet laid down my roots in my new state, what helps me survive this time is my focus on the care I can control. I practice that, in part, through care for my students, as they are my community at this university. I have only gotten to know some of my new colleagues with social distancing measures, but I do know my students. After all, my new students and I learned to navigate college during the pandemic when the university went back to meeting for face-to-face classes during the Fall 2020 semester. I helped them feel supported while the world around them remained uncertain and scary. Most of my students were experiencing college for the first time as freshmen, and I decided I would be the one to help them navigate it since I was also new to campus. We'd learn together. In doing so, they started to check in on me, too. Caring for them has been care to me in this moment.

And of course, I, along with my truly stellar co-parent and spouse, care for my daughter. I find that new motherhood grounds me in the reality that nothing is certain and that everything changes daily. It also reminds me that I have the care and support I need in many, many ways. She grounds me: her little giggles when I get home, her first crawl, her first walk, and the way her eyes widened the first time she saw the Long Island Sound. Simply watching her watch the world grounds me. She loves to see the snow outside our big front window, so I stop to watch it with her. But it is also something that grounds the realities of my work life. I have been forced to re-think my time and energy, as we all have. In truth, it is not all positive. I struggle intensely with the ‘shoulds.’ I *should* be working, but I *should* also be attending to my child and our home. Being a good mother and a good academic is a never-ending negotiation. As it currently stands, my life is in constant opposition to what I thought motherhood was supposed to look like, and I am still working on letting go of my own—and society’s—unrealistic expectations. Now, I try to remind myself that sometimes being a mother means loving my child unconditionally, even when I need to put myself first.

Taking care of myself and others also comes with a recognition that I am not the person I was before March 2020. I became a mother in lockdown, and I still have not had the opportunity to emerge into the world, as my new self. It’s an identity that feels hidden from and unseen by the world around me. I have yet to emerge fully, but I wait longingly for that day. I am still figuring out how my needs are different and what care will look like in a post-pandemic world. Until then, I am choosing to forgive if I don’t always practice small gestures of care for myself. Some days, that forgiveness is more difficult to achieve, and spiraling into “I’m a bad mother, partner, pet-parent, worker, academic, etc.” can still overthrow my very best efforts at maintaining some peace in my life. But forgiveness lies in the fact that each day ends and a new

one begins; I can try again tomorrow. And so, I ask: What are the small things that bring you light? What seemingly mundane activities soothe you? Make time for them and cherish the moments, even if those moments are few and far between. Especially if those moments are few and far between.

To be new to a job, contingent, and a new parent right now...well, I can tell you it's a lot. But I don't necessarily think my "a lot" is more than your "a lot." After a year like no other, perhaps it is time for us all to take a moment to take up space. To find our care.

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