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Work-Life Balance??? I'm the last person who should be writing about this. It's not that I don't try. I've read the books, attended workshops, and can spout all the inspirational advice I've heard throughout the years. However, the demands of my family and being a university professor are such that I often feel that work-life balance is something I'm not truly going to achieve until I retire. That is at least not until I take a step back and realize that my work-life balance doesn't have to look like the ideal I have in my head of time for work, home, exercise, sleep, family and friends over the course of day or even a week. To find my balance I have to look over the course of a year.

I'm in the pool of working people with an aged and infirm parent whom I care for. This is compounded by living in different states. It means that several times a year I travel to his home and spend a week or more helping him sort through papers, resupplying his cabinets, taking him to doctors, helping him remember the old days, and getting him out of his rooms. Even though one of my siblings lives near him, her more frequent but short visits aren't enough to see what the real issues are. For that, my extended visits are necessary and are my highest priority.

Although I can't take off during semesters when I'm teaching, I do manage to visit every 8 -10 weeks or so for at least a week. In the black hole of caregiving needs, I rarely do much related to my job when I'm away. Of course, when I get back to the university, the list of things I have to do is even longer than before I left, and there is less time to do it in. That makes for some long days and weeks. At times I'd like nothing more than to say no to "opportunities," but I like my work, and want to be involved in departmental and professional activities. Plus, the reality is that when you need money to fund your research and graduate students, writing another proposal feels less like an opportunity and more like a necessity – too bad if the due date comes at the same time of year that your department is interviewing candidates for new positions and there are a host of seminars and socials you must attend, several graduate students for whom you serve on a graduate committee all inform you that they want to graduate the same semester and hand you 200-page documents to review for their defenses, and your home furnace or water heater conks out at the same time. At that point, sleep, exercise, friends, etc. take second or even tenth place behind what must be done. Too much of that, however, is unsustainable – for anyone. So, I've had to come up with a few strategies to make it through the times when it's tough to come up for air.

1. Cut yourself some slack: When I see the stack of un-folded laundry piling up, layers of dust growing in the corners a room, or I am eating take-out for the third day in a row, I cringe and am glad that my mother can't see it, because that is not how I was raised. But my mother didn't work the hours outside the home that I do, plus take care of the yard, home repairs, and the car, so I had to stop trying to live up to her standards – or anyone else's. I tolerate a mess as long as I can and then hire a cleaning service or get help mowing the lawn. I also have one day a week that I designate a “no guilt” day. Of course I'll have a list of things that should get done, but if I never get out of my pajamas, talk for hours on the phone with a friend, or go on a spontaneous road trip and do nothing at all that was on the list, that's okay too.

2. Communicate: This is something I'm particularly bad at, so it's “do as I say, not do as I do, advice”. When I'm totally buried in work, my MO is to hunker down, keep plugging away at what needs to be done and completely tune out all the external reminders that something is late or questions about what is going on. Afterwards, I hear from colleagues and friends that if I had only communicated, they could have helped, worked around me, or at least not worried. Makes sense.... I'm working on that. In my defense, asking for help is not in the Scandinavian nature.

3. Keep your eye on the big picture: On the days that I do feel overwhelmed and want to run away and never come back, it helps to remember what the upside is. I think how lucky that I have a job with a relatively flexible schedule and can be with my family when they need me or want me around for a special event.

Finally, it's important to remember that life changes. In a few years I may not need to make extended visits to help my father. My schedule may look more like the models I read about, but I'm not in any hurry for that time.

BIO

Astrid Jacobson is an Associate Professor of Soil Chemistry/Biogeochemistry at Utah State University. She moved around a bit while growing up, living in upstate New York, Mexico City, northern Illinois, California, Norway and New Jersey, before her family settled permanently in northern California.

While obtaining an undergraduate degree in chemistry at UC Davis, she started taking classes in environmental toxicology. This was the time when stories of selenium toxicity and its effects on aquatic birds at Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge were front page newspaper stories. Eager to help find a solution, in her senior year, Astrid asked one of her toxicology professors, Dr. Richard Burau, if she could work with him. It was a big surprise to her to learn, sometime later, that Dr. Burau was actually a *soil* chemist. Coming from an urban background it never occurred her that dirt was actually something that could be studied, but over time she became fascinated with soil and broad range of subjects that it encompasses. She ended up working with Dr. Burau for 10 years and earned an MS in Soil Science. From there she continued on to get her Ph.D. with Dr. Murray McBride at Cornell University.

Although she had no interest in a faculty position initially, working with students, and helping to develop and teach courses during her postdoctoral experience in soil biogeophysics and engineering with Dr. Philippe Baveye led to her career path as a university professor. She loves the opportunity to conduct research with graduate and undergraduate students, watching them improve their skills and grow increasingly independent. Teaching is an opportunity to share her passion for soils with students, and reminds her of what she loved so much about the subject in the first place.

Astrid enjoys the four seasons, beauty and small town feel of living in a mountain valley in northeastern Utah, as well as the diversity and opportunity to breathe salt air again when she visits her family in CA.