

Having It All

I am an 80s child. My teenage years were spent in the midst of the Cold War, punk rock, and hair-sprayed hair. I was lucky enough to have parents who raised me to believe that I could accomplish anything I wanted if I worked hard enough. I was unlucky enough to spend my formative years brainwashed into thinking that I could “have it all.”

I imagined myself one day adeptly juggling kids (who were perfect), a home (that was also perfect), and a career (at which I was perfect). No one told me—or the thousands of girls like me—that “having it all” often means sacrificing things along the way. “Having it all” does not leave room for “perfection” because it means cramming as much into every second of every day as possible. “Having it all” means cutting corners whenever possible because 24 hours does not leave room for everything a working mother must do in a given day.

After 13 years of marriage and 10 1/2 years of motherhood, I have juggled children, a home, and a career. Notice the deliberate absence of the adverb “successfully” between “have” and “juggled.” But I suppose success is a relative term.

My kids are not perfect, but they are not bullies, they have nice friends, and they do well in school (despite my fears that they do not read enough). My home is not perfect, but it is clean (if not as organized as I would like). My career, which has changed several times during my adult life, is certainly not perfect and always seems to interfere with my expectations for myself as a mother.

I suppose I now mark my success with my children’s mile stones: I was supremely proud, thrilled (and relieved) when my oldest son told me that he liked the book *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* better than the movie of the same name. I was also thrilled when the same child received a rather long book for Christmas last year, read the whole thing, and liked it! My middle child recently took on the challenge of reading a book that was probably above his reading level, determined that he could read and understand it. (Notice the trend.)

Every time I think I have shed my 80s sensibilities regarding work and motherhood, some insidious thought pops into my consciousness. While I am supremely proud of my children and their accomplishments (and still guilt ridden that I do not do more with them in an educational sense), I am still looking for the perfect career.

My earliest career attempts involved writing and editing in the business world. There was not a lot of fulfillment, and I did not spend as much time with my family as I wanted. I also did not have time to cook pretty meals and keep my house up to snuff (at least my snuff). (Has anyone mentioned high/out-of-reach standards?)

The birth of my first child spawned an interest in education, and the birth of my second child became the impetus to seek out a career in the field. I went back to school, and two years later, I emerged with a teaching certificate and a Master’s degree in education. I actually thought that being a teacher would “simplify” my life. The joke was on me. It was the hardest—and second most fulfilling—thing I have ever done. I was good at teaching and I loved it. A lot of teenagers write a lot better because they spent time in my classroom; I am very proud of that. However, it was also exhausting. I could easily have worked 60 hour plus weeks (and sometimes did). Classrooms are just too full. Imagine grading 140 essays that take 15 to 20 minutes each several times each quarter in addition to all of the other grading and prep work.

My children would not have recognized a home cooked meal if they did not encounter them at their grandparents’ homes. The laundry was piled high (clean and dirty), and I had weeds in my flower garden. I thought I was going to die the first year my oldest child brought homework home. Factor in the newest trends in education that tell teachers that everything they’ve been doing is wrong and the politicians who think they know best (even though their last classroom experiences were as students), and you have a profession that can swallow you alive. As I said, I loved teaching, but I hated the politics of public education.

Five years (and one more child) later, brings me to my keyboard and this moment. I am still searching for a career that provides not only income, family time, and fulfillment, but one that makes me feel successful, as if I have realized that unattainable dream. It seems that I cannot totally escape my desire to “have it all” even though common sense dictates otherwise.

Michele R. Acosta
Writing Sample

No, No, No

The word no is probably the most overused word in the English language. I speak from experience since I myself use it frequently.

I might begin a normal day by saying, “No, Joshua, you may not have a hotdog for breakfast,” or “No, Alex, please don’t throw your cereal on the floor.” After breakfast, I might say, “No, Joshua, don’t hit your brother,” or “No, Alex, don’t kick your brother.”

While I’m making lunch, I usually need to tell Alex, “No, you cannot climb onto the kitchen table.” By early afternoon, which is the time of day I set aside for my work, I usually find myself telling Joshua, “No, you cannot wake Alex from his nap” or “No! Don’t touch Mommy’s computer!”

By late afternoon, I find myself saying either one or a combination of the following: “No, you cannot climb on the dresser”; “No, you cannot sit on the dresser”; “No, you cannot jump off of the dresser.” By early evening my repertoire usually includes, “No, boys, you cannot crash your cars into the walls” and “No, Alex, you cannot eat the cookie you’ve dropped on the floor. No! You can’t take the dirty cookie out of the garbage!” On any given day, by the time my sons are securely tucked into their beds and are soundly sleeping - that can be anywhere from 8:00 until 11:00 - I have probably used the word no at least one-hundred times.

No has little value in our household, which I look upon as a microcosm of the world at large. People habitually ignore signs saying: no parking, no smoking, or no loitering. Last night, I watched a man park his car in a parking place reserved for the handicapped. Although the car had a handicapped parking permit displayed properly, none of the four people who emerged from the car had any visible handicap.

People generally look upon an answer of no as a challenge. Romantic movies are filled with plots in which the guy doesn’t give up until he gets the girl and they live happily ever after. If so many adults fail to respond to the word no, then how can I expect anything different from two small children? The answer is that I cannot expect anything different, yet breaking the “no habit” is a difficult prospect.

With such blatant overuse, the word no has obviously lost its meaning; at least it has lost its meaning for my sons. The more often I say no, the less often my sons respond to it; it is as if a viscous circle has taken over the discipline in our household. If I had not already recognized the overuse of this two-letter-word which has invaded my home, I would have been startled when Alex, my almost-two-year-old son, began saying, “No-no-no. No-no-no.” He has even been known to chant “no-no, no-no,” while walking through the house with a cup of juice. I console myself with the thought that he at least understands that juice does not belong outside of the kitchen.

I find this to be a very difficult situation. With boys like mine, I cannot sit idly by waiting for a witty response to hit me in the face. It is more likely that they will hit each other in the face - or somewhere else. My greatest concern is that one day they will be in a dangerous situation (thinking, of course, that they are having great fun) and that my warnings will go unheeded because no has no meaning for them. Not that jumping off of dressers and climbing on tables are not potentially dangerous situations; this is the reason why I do not waste time on brilliantly creative responses which would satisfy the gurus of child psychology before mobilizing into action. It simply seems that climbing and jumping are commonplace occurrences in my house. In retrospect, it is easy to tell myself that I should have been more creative in formulating responses to my sons’ exuberance and zest for life; however, in the midst of two boys rolling on the floor with legs and arms flailing, the word closest at hand is usually: No!

I have attempted to extricate myself from this circle in which no resembles yes more than it resembles itself. I have tried laughing; they laughed with me as they jumped from the fourth step of the stair case. I have tried getting on the floor and rolling around with them; they pinned me down and Alex almost choked me as he tried to climb on my back for a piggy-back-ride. At that moment, I again reverted to humor saying to my son, “Alex, you are an instigator. Do you know what that means?” He threw his arms up in the air and yelled, “Fun!”

Michele R. Acosta
Writing Sample

I have tried to curb my use of the word no by curbing my sons' activities. My attempts at discipline have included giving time-outs, sending them to their rooms, and putting them in corners. These methods seemed to have some immediate value, but only until the next time. I even tried to instill more meaning in the word no by saying very seriously, "No means no!" I have to admit that I have been reduced to this innocuous statement more often than once.

There are times when I simply let chaos reign. I listen closely for the danger signals and intervene only if and when I hear them. I can also count on Joshua, who recently turned four, to tattle. It's wonderful because he even tattles on himself.

Recently, I ignored all of the thuds and booms that I heard coming from the toy room. I even ignored the cries and screams since none lasted for more than a few seconds. Eventually, Joshua came downstairs to tell me that Alex was in the bathroom taking everything out of the cabinet. I walked up the stairs, expecting to find towels strewn about. Instead, I found Alex standing on the vanity removing all of the medicine from the medicine cabinet. Joshua, who had followed me up the stairs, left the bathroom and returned a few moments later with a large bottle of children's cough medicine and a small bottle of syrup of ipecac that he had found in Alex's bedroom.

Somehow, no did not pack enough power to deal with the situation, so I immediately purchased safety locks for the bathroom and laundry room doors. That eliminated several instances of no per day.

Since I cannot remove all of the furniture from my house, and since I cannot alter my sons' perception of the word no (any more than I can stop my brother from parking illegally downtown), I must continue my search for other successful methods of eliminating no from my vocabulary. The tactic that usually works best with any child is patience; although, it is difficult to be patient when your children are perpetually black and blue, so I must use patience cautiously when jumping and climbing are involved. There are, however, plenty of other occasions in which the word no surfaces in my house. On these occasions, it is my goal to find another response to the situations which arise. So the next time I catch Alex eating Vaseline, before groaning or screeching - No! - I'll have to take a deep breath and say, "Alex, are you hungry?"

If I can successfully reduce these instances of the word no in my vocabulary, I hope that, with age, my sons will eventually learn that no does have a meaning. Until that time arrives, I am left with several years of holding my breath every time I hear Joshua say, "Alex, let's jump!" In the meantime, I have stocked up on Dalmatian Band-Aids and Bactine.

Reading in a Tree

Today is like many of the summer days I spent at my grandparents' house in Indiana—except I am writing, instead of reading and I am sitting in a chair on my deck, instead of on a branch in a tree growing in front of my grandparents' house. But the wind is blowing gently under the umbrella, just like it blew through the leaves so many years ago.

I don't remember how many hours I spent in that tree.

It has been a long time since I felt the wind blow through its leaves. My grandparents sold the house and moved off of the farm the year that I started college. I probably did not climb the tree for the last few years that my grandparents lived there.

I was not a tomboy. In fact, that tree is the only one that I have ever climbed (unless you count the one I tried to climb and got stuck in). It was the perfect tree for a girlie girl to climb. There was one branch that grew straight out from the tree. If I reached up high above my head, I could grasp the branch with both hands and hoist myself up to a much thicker extension of the trunk that grew at about shoulder height. Holding the branch, I "walked" up the trunk until I could swing around and sit in the saddle created by the trunk and the branch. I reached for another branch above my head to pull myself to my feet. An even higher branch allowed me to pull myself to a sitting position on the branch that I had first used to pull myself into the tree. The tree had so many perfectly positioned branches that I could climb a little bit higher in the same fashion, but I usually didn't.

I was not actually interested in climbing the tree. I did not climb for the sake of climbing, but because I wanted to sit on the one branch that was thick enough to be comfortable, lean against the smooth bark of the trunk, and feel the gentle breeze blow through the leaves and through my hair. I usually had a book in hand, too, so climbing higher than my branch was impractical.

I am not sure why, but I never seemed to go to my grandparents' house prepared. I always seemed to be searching for something to read. My grandmother loved decorating. She filled scrapbooks with magazine clippings archiving the year's worth of current home fashions. Had she belonged to my generation, she would probably be a marketing expert. The tools of her passion, women's magazines, fueled my passion. She saved years of back issues of magazines and many of them published one or two fictional pieces per issue.

I remember one about a girl who climbed trees and another about a girl names Lissa (spelled with 2 Ss). Actually, that may have been the same short story. They were all cheesy romances, but the summer breeze blowing through my tree seemed to set the mood and allowed me to slip into fiction-induced trances that the words alone could not have done.

It was a time when things seemed to stand still. By the time I reached high school, I had other things to do than spend weeks at a time with my grandparents reading in a tree. By the time I started college, my grandparents sold the house, but when I was an all-too-shy-pre-adolescent, that tree filled a real need. Ironically, my memory of that tree and the time I spent sitting amongst its leaves is clearer than any single memory from high school or college.

I felt like I belonged. I felt free to be myself—even though I didn't know who that was. At home, I was reminded—especially during the long days of summer—that I did not have many friends. I was painfully shy and somehow, I always felt inferior to other kids my age.

That time before high school was also the only time in my life that I was free to read voraciously. The summer before I started 8th grade, I read titles including *Wuthering Heights*, *The Black Rose*, and *Gone with the Wind*, among others. Everything changed after I started high school. First, higher education took over and dictated my reading (probably for the better), then marriage and family decimated the time I could spend reading.

I've never lost the ability to slide into a trance-like state. This is perhaps the biggest reason that I cannot be the sort who leaves a book on the bedside table and reads for an hour before bed. If a book captivates my attention, I read cover to cover, stopping only to eat (sometimes) and sleep (if I can no longer keep my eyes open). For a long time, it meant that I only read when we went on vacation.

Michele R. Acosta
Writing Sample

We left on one family vacation the day after the fifth Harry Potter book was released. I've read each and every book in the series to my sons more than once. Since we were on vacation, we could only read in short bursts. We finally reached the point in the book where I couldn't disengage myself. I kept reading after I tucked my boys into bed. At 1:00 a.m., my husband finally insisted that I turn the light off. The only place I could turn on a light without disturbing anyone was in the bathroom, so I sat on the cold bathroom floor until 3:00 in the morning so that I could finish the book.

* * *

I drove past my grandparents' old house recently. The tree is still there, but my branch has been cut off. At first I was sad. That branch was there for me when I needed it. But nothing stays the same. The branch was only an extension of the trunk.

I have been able to recapture the essence of those moments spent in my tree in very different places and times. Most recently, our trips to Florida beaches have rekindled memories. I sit under a beach umbrella—often with a book—with the Gulf breeze blowing a bit of nostalgia in off of the water. I watch my sons play with an abandon that only belongs to childhood, and I think about the girl who used to read in a tree.