

People ask what I think about Sheryl Sandberg's advice to "lean in" and Anne-Marie Slaughter's critical retort in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All." I give a pat answer: "I'm a fence sitter." Colour me deliberately evasive.

I've always admired women who enter this conversation calmly, seemingly unworried about arguments or eyebrows of judgment. The secret to their success seems to be genuine confidence that their experiences have merit, that their hard lessons learned will assist other women grappling with similar challenges, and that their hot tips and traps-to-be-avoided will serve as encouragement and guidance for the sisterhood of the working mamas.

When weighing in on how women can best navigate career choices, financial decisions, graduate school, and their intersection with the mother of all controversial topics, actually being a mother, I get nervous. I know I'm stepping into a minefield, certain of one thing only: there are undetonated blasts waiting to be triggered. There is nothing rational here; this is the stuff of raw emotion marinated in cultural and familial soup – it's elephant business.

In *The Happiness Hypothesis*, Jonathan Haidt introduces the metaphor of the elephant and rider to help explain our struggles with life's toughest decisions. Haidt's rider symbolizes logical, conscious, reasoned thought. The elephant is everything else: gut reactions, emotions, and ingrained (often unconscious) beliefs and values about what's right and what's wrong.

The choices I have made sit at the intersection of my rider's focused, rational thinking and my emotionally flighty elephant, influenced so deeply by society's narratives, by my family's values, and by the powerful cultural assumptions about how a woman *should* choose. When my rider and elephant worked well together, decisions about my career, family and legacy aspirations felt clear and easy. When my rider and elephant disagreed, navigating the choices was exceedingly difficult, uncomfortable, and produced a tremendous amount of anxiety.

It was not until sitting down to write that I realized how important money is to me. I was encouraged at an early age by my parents and my grandmothers to be financially independent. I managed and invested my own allowance from the time I was 12 years old. I was encouraged to think carefully before making purchases, and to give to charities only after researching what good they did in the world. I was reminded that we earn our privileges; nothing is handed to us without hard work.

At risk of making the issue surrounding choices about women's career, financial, and family legacies sound far less complex than it is, my rider and my elephant were always aligned around something I consider fundamental to this conversation: ensuring that I could always support myself if I needed to. And the way life turned out, I needed to.

Teaching was (and still is) the heart of my profession. I taught swimming as a teenager, I taught flying in the military cadet gliding program, and I was a certified fitness trainer. Completing a teaching degree was a natural choice for me and proved a practical place to begin my career, doing something I loved.

I fell in love with a Mountie (how romantic!) and my teaching credentials complemented the demands of moving to a new community every few years. My own children were involved in my role as a theatre teacher, spending nights in the drama studio watching rehearsals or helping paint sets. My husband and I had a tag team approach to sharing parenting duties and it usually worked out well (with plenty of help from fabulous teenage babysitters).

Developing my own career was top of mind for me and my husband fully understood that. My aspirations were partly about earning money. Mostly, I needed to learn, stretch, and contribute professionally in order to be happy. My elephant and rider knew that I was not cut out to be Karen-the-school-teacher or Karen-the-lovely-mom for very long.

My husband and I agreed that once our youngest was in school, he would take a posting to Vancouver or Ottawa and it would be my turn for grad school. I wanted to apply the skills I had learned in the military and in the classroom in organizational contexts. We made that deal when we decided to get married.

I was widowed at the age of 34, ten years later. My children were 4 and 8. My world collapsed. With tremendous support from friends, family, the RCMP, my community (including the TD bank by the way), it turns out that life does go on after a tragedy. Murry's death was a catalyst for me to be bold in creating the life I wanted - for me and for my children.

My obsession with managing my career and money was inherited from my mom. She once whispered to me as my dad left to go golfing, "He thinks nothing of spending \$100 on a round of golf and I think nothing of spending \$100 on things that I love to do – make sure you always have that kind of freedom." My mom spoke critically of women who needed to ask permission from their husbands to spend money. Her words stuck. When Murry died I was grateful for my own investment portfolio and my understanding of our finances.

I knew that I needed to follow through on the career promises I had made to myself. I looked for a graduate school that would allow me the flexibility to continue teaching and parenting. I searched out a program that would introduce me to the business world. I knew that I needed to learn a new vocabulary and create new relationships with people who had credibility and experience in large organizations. I am grateful to Royal Roads University for allowing my children to live in student residence with me during the weekends of my program. That is one aspect of my graduate experience that allowed me to keep my rider and elephant nicely in synch. I earned a masters degree and eventually a Ph.D.

My practice began to flourish as my classmates invited me into their organizations to consult, coach, and facilitate change initiatives. I was given faculty positions at The Banff Centre, Royal Roads University, and at the University of Calgary Haskayne School of Business. I consult and coach internationally. I feel lucky. I could never have predicted what unfolded.

“My mom’s a doctor but not the kind that helps people,” says my daughter. When asked what it was like to have a mom who spent most of her time on the road for business instead of being at home my son says, “She put the ‘fun’ in dysfunctional.”

I did not parent in a traditional sense, ever. I was determined to succeed academically, professionally, and financially. I believed that my kids would benefit if I clarified what I needed to feel fulfilled, and that rarely looked like traditional mothering. Some people were critical. Some people were surprised. Some people (especially women) were jealous that I was studying, travelling, and investing my own money to create a life that worked beautifully for me. My elephant sometimes felt hurt that others questioned my choices. At other times, my elephant felt proud when people took the time to tell me that they admired my courage.

Here’s the rub. It has been mostly about me, with very little foresight, very little logical analysis of my deeply held values about parenting or a strategic vision for what it meant to create balance with my career aspirations – it’s embarrassing to admit that. I did what felt fun and healthy and life giving: for me. I knew that I needed to keep my elephant happy.

When I reflect on my experience in grad school, with investment advisors, with my clients and colleagues, nobody went out of their way to encourage or help shape my choices, but nobody ever got in my way. I paid attention to what my rider and elephant wanted and tried not to worry much about others’ perspectives.

It is this “elephant and rider stuff” that is missing from support initiatives I’ve witnessed. If I was hired to consult to graduate schools, large organizations, or financial institutions about supporting women to thrive, I would recommend creating space for these awkward, uncomfortable and usually ambiguous conversations about how women can get clearer on what they really want, what they really don’t want, and how easily their sensitive elephants can get scared and wound up.

People ask for my opinion about all of this prompted, I think, by their hallucination that I am somebody who has handled these life decisions somewhat successfully. I just got lucky.

I wanted my children to be happy and know that they were loved. I knew that I needed to be fulfilled in my professional life with plenty of money to support us, in order to love them as best I could. My elephant and rider are proud of the life we have co-created for ourselves.