"Comedy and Tragedy," or How We Used Our Group Chat to Fill the Pandemic Care Gap

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Introduction

In a recent article, "Why Postpartum Care Is an Oxymoron," Elizabeth Alsop (2021)—one of our co-writers—described a situation that is by now too familiar to most American mothers. Partly detailing her own isolating experiences after giving birth, Alsop summed up how so many of us felt in the weeks and months following our children's births, as though we had "drifted off the map of medical care into some Bermuda Triangle, a literal

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no-man's land populated only by postpartum women" (para. 5). As a result, in isolation and also, too often, in desperation, we found ourselves patchworking support systems: texting old friends; posting on, or lurking in, online social media groups; scanning coffee shop bulletin boards or listservs for local mom groups; paying, when we could, for various forms of postnatal care, from breastfeeding and babysitting to help with sleep training. These are just some of the forms of unanticipated labor new primary caregivers have to take on when there are no clear overarching structures of support in place.

Each of us, as mothers of children now between the ages of four and ten, had experienced this exhausting struggle well before COVID-19 hit, our stories marked by varying degrees of success and, more often, failure. Alsop writes of the local moms' group, whose messages "scared me in their quiet desperation" (para. 13), while Laurel remembers some vague guidance in the form of YouTube videos, and Lauren and Tahneer recall the parenting groups that offered little connection beyond similarly aged children. With families far away or otherwise preoccupied, we were each unable to find the support we needed, though there were the occasional, unexpected bright spots. There was the time, for example, for which Tahneer will always be grateful, when Lauren insisted on walking over to her apartment to give her a hands-on lesson on how to use a breast pump. But we can much more readily recall the tears, anger, frustration, and fear, generally experienced in solitude, or with well-meaning, but equally ignorant, partners. Such connections, after all, depend on knowing when and how to ask for help, not to mention figuring out where to find receptive and generous helpers, who could provide the kinds of knowledge we did not even know we needed.

Fast forward to the pandemic, which also left us all to flail—and in a way returned us emotionally to that postpartum state. Though by this

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point our kids were older and we were further along in our careers, we found ourselves in similarly vulnerable and uncertain positions, not knowing where to turn for support. The group chat we started at the beginning of the pandemic was, in a way, just a new expression of our old patchwork approach to seeking care. This time around, due to our shared experience of desperation, we had more capacity to reflect on how the system was failing us and, in retrospect, had always been failing us. Paradoxically, we could draw on the knowledge gleaned from our earlier struggles, when we had to locate resources as new parents experiencing loneliness and isolation.

We know each other as friends and colleagues through a loose network of New York City graduate schools. Individually, as members of a generation of post-recession academics, we shared the experience of having to jury-rig our professional trajectories in under-resourced institutions. Together, we commiserated over the frustrations of cobbling together careers and maintaining financial stability in a still male-dominated profession that profoundly favored non-humanities academic tracks. Rather than hoarding resources, however, we shared job leads, recommended one another for positions, and even at a few points worked at the same institutions. We were also part of a new generation of academic women with children who, despite our connections to one another, lacked a broader community with which to discuss caregiving in graduate school, or beyond.

In academic circles, we rarely discussed our children. Meanwhile, outside the graduate school context, we had to contend with discourses around intensive parenting and downplay our investments in our careers.[1] And pandemic pressures made this disconnect between work and life feel particularly untenable. These pressures exposed just how tenuous our situations as working parents really were. While the "postfeminist" 1980s and 1990s continued to alert us to certain workplace challenges—notably, the pay gap and sexual harassment—there was little discussion or representation of the difficulties of white-collar working motherhood. The narratives available to us growing up—outside our own narrow, local

[1] See, for example, *The Conflict: How Modern Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women* (written by Elisabeth Badinter (2012)) for more on some contemporary pressures of modern motherhood. As she writes of the past few decades, "Feminist ideology and contraception might have subsequently opened up parameters, but there are now opposing efforts to push women toward a more constrictive model of the good mother" (26). Lisa Belkin's (2022) review of Lara Bazelon's (2022) *Ambitious Like a Mother*—and Bazelon's book (2022)—provides additional historical and contemporary context.

communities—were limited to popular fantasies. We had the unflappable Clair Huxtable (played by Phylicia Rashad) or a character like J.C. Wyatt (played by Diane Keaton), the hard-charging executive-turned-reluctant-mom in *Baby Boom* (Charles Shyer, 1987) who, unable to maintain her high-powered Manhattan career while mothering, moves to Vermont and starts her own baby food business. She is the ultimate working professional mom, able to have it all—in her bespoke Vermont home, no less.[2]

By the time we found ourselves confronting the same dilemma, it was a different moment in the culture. But had things changed all that much? The immediate popularity of the article in *The Atlantic*, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All," by Anne-Marie Slaughter (2012) suggested they had not. Here was a woman with a successful, prestigious career, somehow surprising readers with the news that she was still struggling, even with all the resources at her disposal. The embrace of *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg (2013), published a year later, further showed how stuck the culture remained in woefully inadequate individual solutions to structural problems. The fact that heavily resourced, affluent women were dominating the conversation suggested that all of us were in serious trouble.[3] To put it plainly, help was not on the way. And so, we found ourselves at the beginning of the pandemic, turning to online messaging and group texts as a means of seeking some kind of help.

For this article, we all reread the direct messages we sent each other from spring of 2020 to summer of 2021, and then we each summarized several months' worth of these conversations to reflect on what affordances the group chat offered us. What we hope to provide here then is a case study of parenting while academic, one that also acknowledges our privileges and the inevitable limitations of such a case study. As four middle-class, white, cis-het women, based in and around the New York metropolitan area, we represent a hyper-narrow range of identities and experiences. Yet even in our extreme privilege, we still found ourselves confronting the lack of meaningful structural support, from either social institutions or academic ones. There have been many important large-scale qualitative and quantitative analyses of the impact of the pandemic

[2] Susan Faludi (1991) writes on *Baby Boom* as one of the "backlash films," an advertisement for motherhood. "An unintentionally telling aspect of *Baby Boom*," she explains, "is its implication that working women must be strong-armed into motherhood" (145).

[3] Helaine Olen (2022) offers an insightful and timely critique of *Lean In* noting that "what *Lean In* also failed to acknowledge is that whatever gains women make are not necessarily secure" (para 7).

on parents, and on caregivers, especially mothers, and on people of color (see, e.g., Laura Limonic's (2021) research on the topic). This collaborative reflection on our conversation throughout the pandemic is comparatively quite limited. Yet as literature scholars, we are trained to find meaning in even a limited sample, and we hope that this close-reading exercise might further illuminate larger-scale studies of pandemic parenthood. Moreover, while others, including journalist Anne Helen Peterson (2020) and sociologist Jessica Calarco (2020a, 2020b), have been addressing the ways women uniquely experienced the pandemic—by being made to substitute for our country's missing "safety net"—there has to date only been intermittent discussion about the intersections of care work and academic work throughout the pandemic.[4]

This chapter represents our best attempt to retroactively construct where we were during particular moments throughout the pandemic. It will be necessarily fragmented and incomplete. Our goal in sharing this case study is not to be comprehensive or offer any authoritative account of the academic parenting experience, during the pandemic or at any other time. On the one hand, the reliance on one another was an exercise in radical care and collaboration that continues through the writing of this chapter. On the other hand, it exposes the continuing incompatibility of parenting with the promise of academic life, and the failure of academic institutions to provide faculty with the infrastructure that would allow us, in turn, to support our struggling students. Thus, we seek to demonstrate that consciousness-raising might be accomplished through social media and the digital realm via smaller breakaway groups. While we acknowledge the limited long-term impact of such consciousness-raising, we personally have gained courage to argue locally for better support for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students as a result of this group chat.

Our Conversations

Spring 2020

Our online conversation began on March 18, 2020, two days after the public schools closed in New York City. At the time, we knew we would not see our students again that semester. We believed our children might

[4] See, for example, Miriam Posner's (2020–2021) tireless work on Twitter calling attention to this intersection throughout the pandemic.

be returning to their schools, even if only for a few weeks at the end of June. But, in truth, no one was fully aware how long this would last. We became focused on the everyday of this strange new world: how to get our classes online, how to provide a shred of stability for our children, how to buy groceries. Our exchanges at first were an attempt to schedule a Zoom call, a means by which to connect to a support network outside of our spouses, and a way to find a break from our children and our work. Predominantly, we were checking in: are you okay? I am fine (and also I am "fine"). We sought distraction but also appreciated those who were keeping us tethered to the moment: Elizabeth reported she became emotional on a Zoom call with struggling nursing faculty; Tahneer acknowledged tearing up when her son's teacher worked to make the students feel connected. We spoke of a lack of resilience, barely managing the everyday so that when siblings fought or children couldn't sleep at night, we broke down over what used to be the simple realities of parenthood. On March 30, we began to note that the pandemic was not the same for everyone. When a colleague asked us to do additional committee work and we had to decline because we were homeschooling children and supporting our students, there was obvious resentment from them. We also understood our own privilege in being able to stay home, with our primary health worries being allergy symptoms and an achy back mistaken as the early signs of illness (that never materialized); our lives and our jobs were not in immediate danger.

By April 30, we noted the ongoing breakdown of a system that was hardly functioning to begin with. One of us was serving as an administrator of a program whose part-time faculty members were simply disappearing, with no support in place from the institution or anywhere else. On more than one occasion, we noted that students were complaining (because there was too much work or too little professor contact and because it was a pandemic and everyone was struggling and no one knew whether to tirelessly keep going or give up entirely) and that administrations seemed only concerned with student experience, dismissive of faculty members. We noted all the university-led discussions of how faculty can support students, but no one seemed available to support faculty, and certainly not adjuncts or part-time staff. The system had clearly failed the very people who worked to keep it running, yet somehow it kept chugging along gaining momentum, a steam train on electric tracks. Nonetheless, we periodically sought hope, which as we are approaching the reality of new COVID variants, reads now as both foolhardy and

heroic. On April 7, Tahneer wrote, "I know I'm being optimistic but I can't help but think that maybe some doors will begin to crack open again: maybe we will return to science and academia and community and other things that are becoming more apparent as necessities. Literature and the arts. A need to make meaning out of life." Elizabeth added: "And there are some auspicious signs—the strikes, for instance. I'm hardly an optimist but I do think some who have never questioned the status quo before are beginning to do so." We read this now with chagrin, but perhaps if we account for our own intensified awareness of where academia still has to go as a result of the pandemic, perhaps there is something to be hopeful for. We were seeking the end of the pandemic, but more than that, we were (and are) readying ourselves to interrupt in whatever way possible the system from blindly moving forward.

Summer 2020

It is fitting that our Summer 2020 exchanges kicked off with a political cartoon drawn by Tahneer's eight-year-old son, since it reflects the group's tendency during this period to use humor to offset our ongoing sense of rage, frustration, confusion, and incredulity. On June 5, Laurel joked that "this is 100 percent a simulated world controlled from somewhere else for lol's," and we all agreed. Or as Tahneer put it, summing up our chat vibes, "comedy & tragedy."

The initial panic of the spring had passed, and we were beginning to acclimate to this new not-normal. We were still gathering on Zoom for the occasional happy hour ("Changing out of my bathing suit and looking for booze!" Lauren reported on June 6), and Elizabeth and Tahneer entertained utopian fantasies of buying land upstate. But we were still on edge and clearly haunted by memories of the pandemic's early months ("lots of sirens today," "helicopters tonight"). We were all still unclear about what it was and wasn't safe to do, and we experienced particular decision fatigue when it came to our kids. "Did I blink and [Governor] Cuomo announced camps today?" Tahneer asked in June, while by August we were all, like her, "waiting-and-seeing" about school. "Never forget," Laurel helpfully reminded us, as we spun out, "every choice is bad."

In June, of course, our concerns about the virus and our families' physical safety collided with the events of that month: George Floyd's murder, the protests and uprisings, and state suppression tactics—topics we touched on, sometimes without directly discussing. Instead, we talked

about mitigating risks at Black Lives Matter protests, the NYPD not wearing masks, and the surrealism of the 8 pm curfew imposed in New York.

Then again, we were also, as Laurel acknowledged early on, "#basic" and therefore spent a balance of our time on our everyday concerns: the toll of caregiving, the endlessly extractive nature of academia ("we'll pay you shit and run you ragged"), and the nuttiness of our colleagues and fellow parents. Life went on, and even in the midst of global calamity, we still did things like have sex talks with our kids ("Between the penis questions and the pepper spray questions today …," Tahneer writes). And we still found time for petty complaints. As Elizabeth wrote, "Everyone is saying how nice this all is for introverts except I never get to be alone so it's actually a nightmare??" We encouraged each other to take social media breaks, but struggled since, as Laurel wrote, "My brain is a chaotic mess and [Twitter's] the only thing that reflects it!"

At the same time, we did our best to take advantage of summer and enjoyed some small pleasures. Elizabeth and Tahneer traveled upstate, while Lauren went for a haircut: "I'm sort of expecting a Kate Plus 8 situation but trying to be optimistic." ("Mazel tov!" Tahneer replied.) Laurel hiked for her birthday; Tahneer became "kayak obsessed." We spent time in nature while we could, and braced for fall. "I'm really having a hard time envisioning this year," Elizabeth wrote, "like, at all."

Fall 2020

We all *began* the Fall 2020 semester exhausted and demoralized. As we all started teaching remotely, we noted how burnt out we were and reinforced for each other the importance of doing the bare minimum. We complained of being "spent" and "lacking motivation," gearing up for a "survival" semester.[5] Throughout, we regularly checked in with each other almost every day via direct message. The topic of our conversations ranged from teaching, to the election, to our sense that our employers wanted to extract much more than any of us could possibly have to offer to the kind of workplace chatter (TV shows, weird anecdotes, shared news stories) we weren't getting anymore. We also shared and praised each other's successes: Tahneer's article, Elizabeth's book contract, Laurel's tenure, Lauren's teaching grant. The instability of our children's schooling and

[5] Sara Ahmed (2021) describes shared complaint as generative: a "path of more resistance" (7).

their remote learning was another frequent topic. Laurel was running a preschool pod out of her house while Elizabeth's, Lauren's, and Tahneer's kids were in and out of school, subject to capricious openings and closings and inevitable Covid-19 quarantines. At one point, Tahneer paid a babysitter $25 an hour to play with her sons in the park so she could work. She noted, "I just want to stop all the fucking planning." These conversations are self-reflexive about the support we are giving each other. On Thanksgiving, for example, Elizabeth wrote, "Thankful for you ladies … bright point in a garbage year," and Tahneer reached out on New Year's Eve with "I would never have made it through 2020 without the three of you!" We also connected to each other to make sense of a semester punctuated by one professional and political shock after another to the point where shock became tedious. As Lauren wrote around the time of Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the Supreme Court, "I've got no panic left."

Working isolated at home, watching the pandemic proceed grimly through Trumpian farce, we also shared our sense of disassociation. Tahneer asserted that we must be in *The Truman Show*, Elizabeth lamented how "bonkers" this timeline felt and asked if this is the third act of a movie to which Lauren replied she wanted to fast forward to the end. There was a great deal of relief after the results of the election finally came in; Elizabeth and Tahneer attempted to find each other amidst celebrations in Prospect Park while Laurel kept everyone updated with Twitter post celebrations from inside her home in central New Jersey. The semester ended with a kind of settled resignation in our conversations. We discussed how much easier we had been on our students and how this semester had made us care less about high-minded objectives and more about, as Elizabeth wrote in September, "get[ting] my students to pay attention to things." She also noted, and we all agreed, that "academic writing seems so pointless now." One of us turned our collective semester-weary gaze on a colleague of theirs returning from sabbatical who naively asked for teaching tips: "Girl, read the room! We are way past normalized. This is survival mode now."

Spring 2021

With the attempted coup followed by the U.S. presidential inauguration, we had a few more weeks of shock, then celebration, to open the New Year. There was a sense of relief on January 19, even if realistically we knew we were still in the thick of things. Tahneer wrote, "Today at dinner, I

said, 'Kids, guess who is no longer president after today?'; And my five-year-old said, 'Donald Trump!! That motherfucker!'" There was other news at the end of January, too, to take our minds off the world: Laurel officially had tenure, and Lauren's son was flourishing at his new school.

Indeed, our interest in discussing politics turned into a close watching of vaccine and vaccination news, particularly in New York and New Jersey, where we all live. While close friends and family members started to receive early vaccinations, we were also hearing about new strains and possible vaccine resistance. Sometimes we'd interrupt our worried conversations to talk about novels and TV shows we were using to distract ourselves (*Bridgerton*, anyone? Or the rediscovered Claude McKay novel?). Eventually, with vaccination numbers ticking at a rate of 0.1 percent a day (in New York), we turned to discussing our children's schooling issues and our increasing professional malaise.

All our school-aged children had returned to a more regular schedule by the new year, but this new normal was bringing out additional concerns: a blown-up pod; a ten-day quarantine; a message from a teacher about one of our kids undressing during a Zoom meeting (he was feeling too hot!); kids crawling around underfoot as we taught from our bedrooms. Elizabeth wrote, "So L is doing a 'free verse' poetry unit and her first poem was about … anger? Not sure if I should be proud or concerned."

Our central topic throughout, though, seemed consistently to be professional malaise. Teaching difficulties came up—mainly case-by-case scenarios, each of us asking, in turn, for advice about a student or a class. But more consistently we talked about a general distrust of our institutions and a feeling of having been abandoned or taken advantage of. As Lauren wrote, "Academia is weird because there are these supposed (ableist) benchmarks about when it is supposed to be okay to have a family … But like other professions, you have to 'hide' your family." Laurel wrote of post-tenure service pressures, "I mean I also really want to just tap out, read, write, teach, and not do any major service. People have done that. It just seems shitty? Like other junior and mid-career women will just have more slack to pick up." Elizabeth wrote, "That is my all-time mantra from Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020): 'the institution cannot love you.' It's a hard truth for sure!" Laurel replied, "I'm gonna tell everyone I'm about to have a nervous breakdown as a working parent through Covid."

It was surprising (or not?) how we spoke almost not at all about our own research projects, perhaps because none of us were able to do much research or if we did, we just didn't see this channel as the right place to

discuss it. There was also limited talk about partners, which also seemed surprising. Many of our conversations about the professional world (conferences, teaching) seemed centered around pre-pandemic comparisons. Were the feelings we had (about the Modern Language Association conference, for example) particular to this year, and its online format, or was this online format just exposing, more powerfully perhaps, what we had already been experiencing for a long time coming?

Conclusion

We have all been friends for over a decade, in occasional contact before the pandemic started, but we had never before interacted regularly as a group of four. We have felt lucky to fall into this small group chat. We each had colleagues at our own institutions and other parents we could commiserate with, but here was a space where we could discuss both academia and parenting with old friends from other schools. This space particularly enabled us to compare notes on the emptiness of our institutions' rhetoric of care. We are all asked to do care work—diversity, equity, and inclusion committee service; student support; faculty mentorship. While our universities emphasize the importance of such work, they also devalue it by refusing to provide those undertaking it with the appropriate compensation and recognition.[6]

Going through our threads, we are reminded how much this devaluation was exposed during the pandemic. In university emails and faculty-wide Zoom meetings toward the end of Spring 2020, we noted there was a tone of toxic positivity: a focus on what to us was an impossible "restart" plan and lectures on remembering to support our students while the university provided us, in turn, with little support. The discussion of layoffs was inevitable but also took on the tone of threat. We needed to fill our courses and loads somehow; we needed to teach courses formerly filled by adjuncts; we needed to fulfill our responsibilities and then some, or we would be the next to go. Somehow, with our degrees in literature, we were also responsible for the university's financial viability.

[6]For more on the current "demoralized" state of higher education, see Alexander K. McClure's (2021) recent article, "Higher Ed, We've Got a Morale Problem--and a Free T-Shirt Won't Fix It," posted September 27, 2021, which speaks to this problem including and beyond mothers in academia, and shows the widespread nature of these feelings of frustration and unease.

At the same time, staff people with whom we had worked for years were let go. One of us worked with adjuncts who were ill, or whose family was, and could not finish out the term, while also having to inform other adjuncts that there was no work for them. The university response was consistently focused on the student experience and almost never on our own exhaustion and experiences of fear and loss, with the exception of hackneyed reminders to participate in self-care. There was cognitive dissonance surrounding the fact that we were living in a calamity, yet expected not only to carry on but to do better. Why wasn't there more than a superficial recognition of the intensive labor it took to reinvent our courses while attempting to provide some stability for our students? And why, given this labor, hasn't the university acknowledged faculty as the foundation of their mission rather than an expenditure on a constantly updated Excel spreadsheet? Why are we tasked with devising individual solutions to structural problems?

In other words, there was no safe place within our institutions to have public conversations about the challenges we experienced. Our online chat functioned as a judgment-free zone in which to commiserate about the moments we felt too stuck, too lost, that it was all too hard, before dusting ourselves off and entering the fray of Zoom teaching again. University messaging is frustratingly one-sided; our conversations were correspondingly resigned. We coped by sleeping a lot, or not at all; drinking a lot, or not at all; alternating between over-parenting or neglect; working all the time or ignoring emails for mental health; watching bad films; and often ignoring or fighting with our partners. If larger support networks like the Academic Mamas Facebook group risked "context collapse," to borrow danah boyd's (2014) term, and difficulty identifying across discipline, institution type, and employment situation, conversely, we sometimes noticed that the intimacy of our group led us to "preach to the converted," and we wondered, at times, if we were too comfortable or unchallenged in our thinking.

Having mostly returned to in-person teaching this semester, we are in touch less, but count on each other more. The stakes of our relationship seem higher, and our questions are often professional in nature: What is the best way to communicate this boundary? How do we self-advocate in this circumstance? How can we offer students guidance and protect our own time? We also share continuous disappointment as Covid refuses to ebb and our children continue to face challenges after so many months of various levels of isolation. Our tiny community of like-minded women

provided a respite from COVID-era isolation, but it also provided a much-needed reminder that it is not only our individual academic lives that are a problem. It's not us, it's them. So, Lauren finds herself gathering her courage and speaking out in a faculty meeting about inequitable assessments of humanities faculty that undervalues their labor; Tahneer seeks to develop her pedagogical practices without further burnout; Elizabeth advocates for herself in a negotiation with an editor; all while Laurel fearlessly leads the production of this chapter. And as we try to move forward (with masks on and vaccine cards in hand), we realize more than ever the intense need for faculty connections beyond the rhetoric of shared governance and among institutions, disciplines, and departments. There is tremendous possibility in what we can learn outside the academy, and from one another, about collaboration, empathy, and the value—and inevitable limitations—of our patchwork of care.

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