*My Journey as an Academic Mama*

**Dr. Elizabeth Karcher**

**Associate Professor of Animal Sciences**

**Purdue University**

As I sit here on day 84 of quarantine with my twin boys curled up on either side of me, I relish in the peacefulness of watching “Mickey Mouse Clubhouse” for the 10th time this week with my little guys. This quiet moment does not last long as I begin to hear two of my daughters arguing in the kitchen and my phone reminds me of another Zoom call in 15 minutes. A call about curriculum that I must lead for an hour. Life with five young children and a husband who also shares similar ambitions to excel in academia is chaotic.

I am frequently my own worst critic and set expectations for myself that are often unrealistic and hard to achieve. I do have a skillset that I can share with others. My love of learning and teaching guided me to my current job as an Associate Professor at Purdue University, i.e. a “working mom”. The joy I experience mentoring students, traveling with them abroad to explore the unknown, and engaging them in the classroom comes with developing relationships and the understanding of my students’ needs. I often find myself telling my students that they can have it all… excel at being a mom or a dad and excel in your career. As a society we talk about how this balance can easily be achieved, but I question if balance is the right term we should be using.

I started my journey to taking back my work-life balance nine months ago. After eight years in a non-tenure position at a different university and three years at Purdue as an Assistant Professor, I was burned out with the constant struggle of balancing a demanding career, my relationship with my husband, and the unique needs of each of my five kids. The self-imposed pressure to be perfect at home and at work was unrealistic, drained on my mental health, and landed me on blood pressure medicine despite being a marathon runner. I realized that I couldn’t do it all. My valued skillsets as a mom and a teacher were suffering from the endless demand of deadlines.

I began by creating a list of activities I would try to achieve throughout the fall and spring semesters. Some of these activities included attending campus seminars on work-life balance, limiting time spent on emails when I was home in the evening, monthly date nights with my husband, and prioritizing running. In October I attended a luncheon which included a panel of my peers. I appreciated each of the stories and advice, but found it really hard to relate to the speakers. Nobody on the panel had more than two children and some had none. Surely, they had it easier than me with their struggle to find that perfect balance! As the days went by after the luncheon, I was able to reflect on each of the stories and unique situations and began to realize that each of us has a different perspective. We use this perspective to frame how we perceive our struggle with work-life balance. This ability to frameshift, highlighted my ability to empathize with other, a skillset of mine that I value.

As I continued through this journey, I began to prioritize the things that were most important to me. My intercultural journey needed to begin with me and making sure that my needs were met. To me this meant really thinking about what was most important and what would bring me work-life satisfaction, not balance. With this train of thought in place, I find myself more relaxed and have found greater enjoyment in the selected activities that I do decide to complete. The stress feels more manageable and with this comes the ability to recognize and better respond to the needs of my kids, husband, students, and my colleagues.

Like most, COVID-19 has thrown a wrench in plans. The skills and practices I’ve accumulated since last summer assist in guiding the decisions I make each day during quarantine. I hope life will return to ‘normal’ soon, but I am grateful for the time I’ve spent on creating work-life satisfaction. I suppose this will be a continuous reflection and deliberate decisions to create my happiness and contentment with my choices, both in and out of my home. With this, my journey to personal and intercultural development continues!