

all my kids want are snacks, so many snacks

INADEQUATE

EYE-OPENING

a learning experience

Sleepless

unwieldy

JUGGLING

feeling like I'm failing at my work job & the job of being a parent

CHAOS

Teacher + tech support

JOY

GRIEF

fractured time

Exhausting

never enough hours in the day

REALIZING HOW MANY SMALL MOMENTS I

HAD BEEN MISSING WITH MY KIDS

stressful

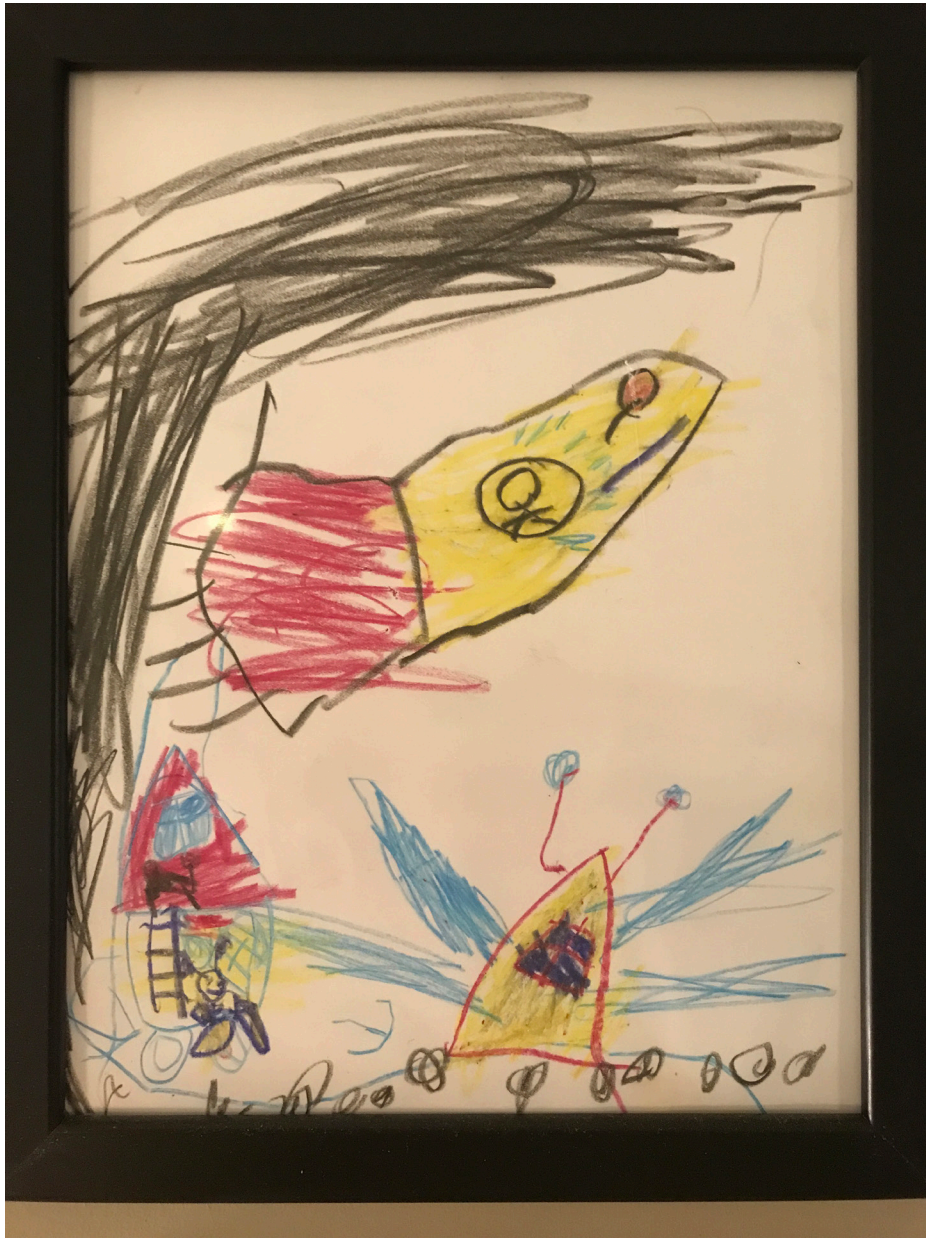
STRETCHED TOO THIN

no one understands what we're going through

Overwhelming

struggle to balance

connection — so much connection



Camper Vans, by Maren Johnson, age 4 ½.
(In June 2020 we rented a camper van and drove 13 hours each way to visit elderly relatives; this experience inspired the drawing.)

I am stressed, overworked,
underpaid, and our condo
is too tiny for everyone's
emotions and toys and
laptops.

Art Librarian Parents and Caregivers
reflections on pandemic life and work
March 2022

all contributions from members of the
ALPaCa SIG of ARLIS/NA

compiled by Kate Joranson
Gabriella Karl-Johnson
& Alice Whiteside

in conjunction with the ALPaCa-sponsored panel
at the 2022 ARLIS/NA conference

Caregiving is an impossible, implausible pose. It's tenuous perch, it's one foot placed gingerly in front of another. It's a stance that asks one to stop time even as the world revolves. It's a motionless nap and tousled sheets. It's a five-day quarantine, overdue assignments, missed deadlines, and mussed hair. It's a disheveled room hidden by Zoom background of a photo taken at a conservatory two years ago in the Before Times. It's loads of laundry piled with misshapen cloth masks. It's unsustainable and yet week in, week out, caregiving is the unspoken mistral never cited.

Caregivers are ALWAYS working. When you're not on the clock for your job, you're on the clock with your family. Before the pandemic those two sets of responsibility had boundaries but since the pandemic started, those of us with dependents at home are working both jobs at once, every day, all day. It's exhausting.

We've had childcare since August 2020, but those first few months of isolation were very intense. My son stopped napping right as lock down began and refused to do anything with his father since he knew I was home. Many meetings and instruction sessions had the background noise of his meltdowns over being separated from me.

What I most want them to know is that for those of us with young children, the pandemic is far from over. Returning "back to normal" is simply not possible yet. And is so, so dispiriting to see the rest of the world around move on and treat you (and your children) as an obstacle. I get it, you're tired. We're all tired. But our kids are worth protecting, and prioritizing.

Before the pandemic I could practically only see my child on the weekend because it was bedtime by the time I came home from work. Though it's been a real struggle, the pandemic allowed me to spend more time with my child during this all too brief period of their lives and catch some milestones.

What I want my non-caregiver colleagues to understand is the way that work and caregiving often became a zero-sum game between caregivers. In my household, with two full-time working parents (one also managing an autoimmune disease) and a 4-year old at home, this was not a peaceful pause or an opportunity to focus extra-hard on work projects. If I was working, my husband could not work. If he was working, I could not work. I mean, not in any substantial way. In May 2020 I had a chapter due for a book project, and I wrote most of it between 9pm and 1am over a series of ten days. The acrimony and bitterness of our work detracting from each other's lives and work, and from our family's life, was something I never want to experience again.

I want people to understand how much childcare matters to working caregivers, in practical and emotional ways. Our daughter's preschool closed permanently in May 2020, and the next one she attended closed permanently in December 2020. Each closure was like a death we needed to mourn as a family and as a school community. We live far from family and could not look to them for childcare help. We cobbled together patches of time and online instruction until we found a third preschool for her to attend, and when she started Kindergarten in person last fall and I returned to my office full-time, we were finally able emerge from that feeling of all of us being continually at odds, waiting for our turn to do too much in too little time.

As a director, I am meant to lead and keep up morale. I gave everyone support as my oldest child was sick, as my college age children were home, as my MIL lay dying. When she died, I was not given the same courtesey. I'm not sure this is something I will recover from, because it is demanded of me. I literally was told no one wanted to hear that my sibling had done something pretty terrible and walked out of their caregiving duties for my only remaining parent during the same period I was caring for my in laws, who I was now responsible for--on the other side of the country. I am not allowed to act sad or tired. I just have to be encouraging and strong. I am done. I am pretty much hoping I wind up in the hospital or worse at this point.

One minute before introducing the keynote speaker for the ARLIS conference, I had a naked screaming 4 year old clinging to me. (We were on day 7 of a 14 day quarantine. It was a very long two weeks.)

The pandemic has been crippling for me as a parent and full-time librarian. I am a worse parent now than I was before the pandemic. The stress, anxiety, constant reprimanding, fights, homework checks, Zoom meetings, remote schooling, moaning, whining, complaining, daylong dependence on momma, a feeling of being trapped inside your own home, and a constant fear of losing my job due to budget shortages has taken its toll. This was compounded by my fear that my unvaccinated kids would get sick and end up in the hospital. At the beginning of the pandemic, when work-from-home was still new, my daughter was 3 years old. Her daycare was closed and she was at home with us. She's a kindergartener now, almost 6, and she never went back to daycare. So we had to teach her how to read, write, and do simple math while we were at home too. Back when she was 3, she was still napping at daycare. But at home, with me, the only way she would nap was to sleep on my chest. So when I had meetings during naptime, I would log into Zoom, put on my earbuds, and listen to the meeting from my bed, with my daughter napping on me. That lasted for weeks. She was also potty-trained at the time the pandemic started, but like many children, regressed, and started having accidents in the bathroom, every day. So in between work obligations, making sure my school-aged child was in his remote classroom, and keeping my preschooler busy, I was wiping pee off the bathroom floor and doing laundry. To this day, in February 2022, even though we are all vaccinated now, we mask everywhere we go, we wash hands every time we come home, and we avoid crowded or busy indoor spaces. I carry a heavy weight knowing that my kids have lost opportunities for swim lessons, basketball lessons, after-school playdates, birthday parties, dedicated time with their grandparents, holiday get-togethers, movies, community events, church and religious education, foreign language classes, camps, the list goes on. My kids, now 8 and 5, refer to any time before 2020 as "the olden days." My daughter

barely remembers life before the pandemic. They will both carry this experience, which has been frustratingly and selfishly exacerbated and prolonged by anti-vaxxers and anti-maskers, with them forever.



Love Letters

- It's a couple of weeks before ARLIS Chicago, and I'm copying the love letter responses from the google form onto paper for this zine.
- My daughter turned 9 three days before the World Health Org. declared the worldwide pandemic.
- My daughter is currently playing with her ponies and magna-tiles in the attic, while I do this handwriting work. She is now 11.
- I decided to read her the love letter prompt:

The experience of caregiving can evoke longing and regret, and it can be helpful to share and externalize this inner dialogue. Write a quick love-letter to the one or ones you have been caring for - or to yourself - during the pandemic. What are your wishes for them, and for you?

My daughter listened, nodded, looked at the papers on my desk, and then turned and pointed to her pony work. I said "yes, back to it. I get it." Her imaginative worlds have saved her.

Yeah. How many times was I not there for family. How many times was I told I was a bad parent/daughter/DIL because I had to be there for my job? And how many more times?

Nope. I can be optimistic and hopeful about NOTHING in my life right now.

No.
Date

I want my kids to know I love them. I am so sorry I yell so much. I am sorry I tell you to get dressed, brush your teeth, get your coat on, hurry up we're going to be late so many times. Life is tough. Parenting is tough. Parenting in a pandemic is impossible. It's merely ~~surviving~~ surviving. It's not parenting anymore. It's shortcuts and go watch Netflix and no I can't read to you tonight because I'm too tired. But that doesn't mean I don't love you. You are the most important thing I have. I am stressed, overworked, underpaid, and our condo is too tiny for everyone's emotions and toys and laptops. I want to give you everything. I want to give you a bigger house, a yard, a basketball hoop, a swingset. I want to give you a two-car garage so you never have to climb out of a car on the street and step into garbage again. I want to give you all the toys that are in storage, plus more. The pandemic will end someday. You will grow older and you won't be so needy someday. We have to keep surviving together. I know you understand and I love you for that. I love you.

My love,

I have tried to help you see how we, as a white, middle class family, are situated in the landscape of trauma this pandemic created. I have likely not done enough.

I wonder if you will remember how you wished to dig a hole in the yard and live in it until the pandemic is over.

I wonder if you will ever know how utterly gutted I was, when at your well-visit, we learned that you had grown taller but lost several pounds. Your growth chart will forever be marked by this pandemic.

I am sorry you have grown to mistrust so many adults. No. Actually, I'm sorry that there are so many adults who don't deserve your trust. I am grateful you still have trust in me

Love, Mom

To My Lovely Child,

I hope that these pandemic years do not alter your vibrant spirit, the one that both fights with and against me daily. It is such a pleasure to watch you grow and experience the world, lighting up when something new makes sense to you. I know I'm not always the calmest, most patient, most together mama, but I will do absolutely everything in my power to consistently support ~~you~~ who you are at your core. Please be kind to yourself as you learn what failure is and how to overcome the obstacles we all face.

I love you, - Mom

JUST A REMINDER THAT WHEN
YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE A
FAILURE AT WORK BECAUSE
YOU CAN'T GET IT ALL DONE:

Your worth is
not measured by
your productivity.

I wish you sustenance and
a daily shower.

Springtime won't always ring
so hollow, so watch the
buds gradually emerge from
the damp ground with
wonder rather than pessimism.

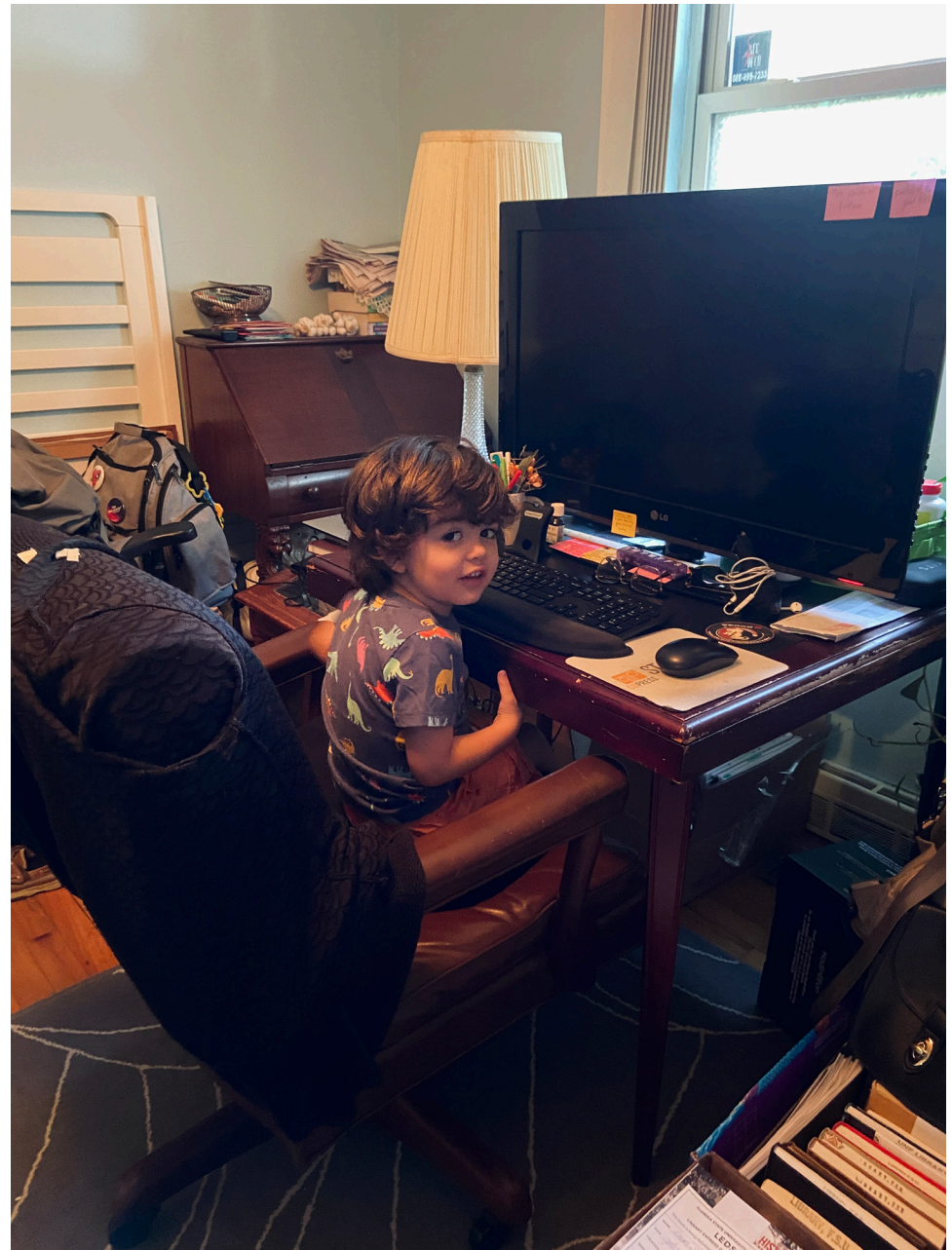
Dear me,

I know you sometimes pretend you
work for a ~~com~~compassionate library
director, who sees us all as real human
beings. One who would write a tweet
like this, late at night, when the local
school district finally announced that
they would be going remote, very early
on in the pandemic:

"Breathing a sigh of relief for the health
and safety of _____'s most vulnerable
teachers, kids, and families. Parents
on my staff (and ~~us~~, in my house)
can also now stop feeling so tied in knots
over the choice to send our babies in
or keep them home. + (Faculty, ¹/₂ staff
of the great _____ Libraries - parents ¹/₂
caregivers, especially, but really
everybody, 'cause we're all in this
together... * we WILL make it work*
I'll write you in the morning.)"

You never got this tweet or email. Very few
caregivers did. It's ok to fantasize about these
alternate worlds, but make sure you are taking
care of yourself and not getting too lost in
hopelessness. Use the fantasy to fuel your
own vision and work. Love, me.

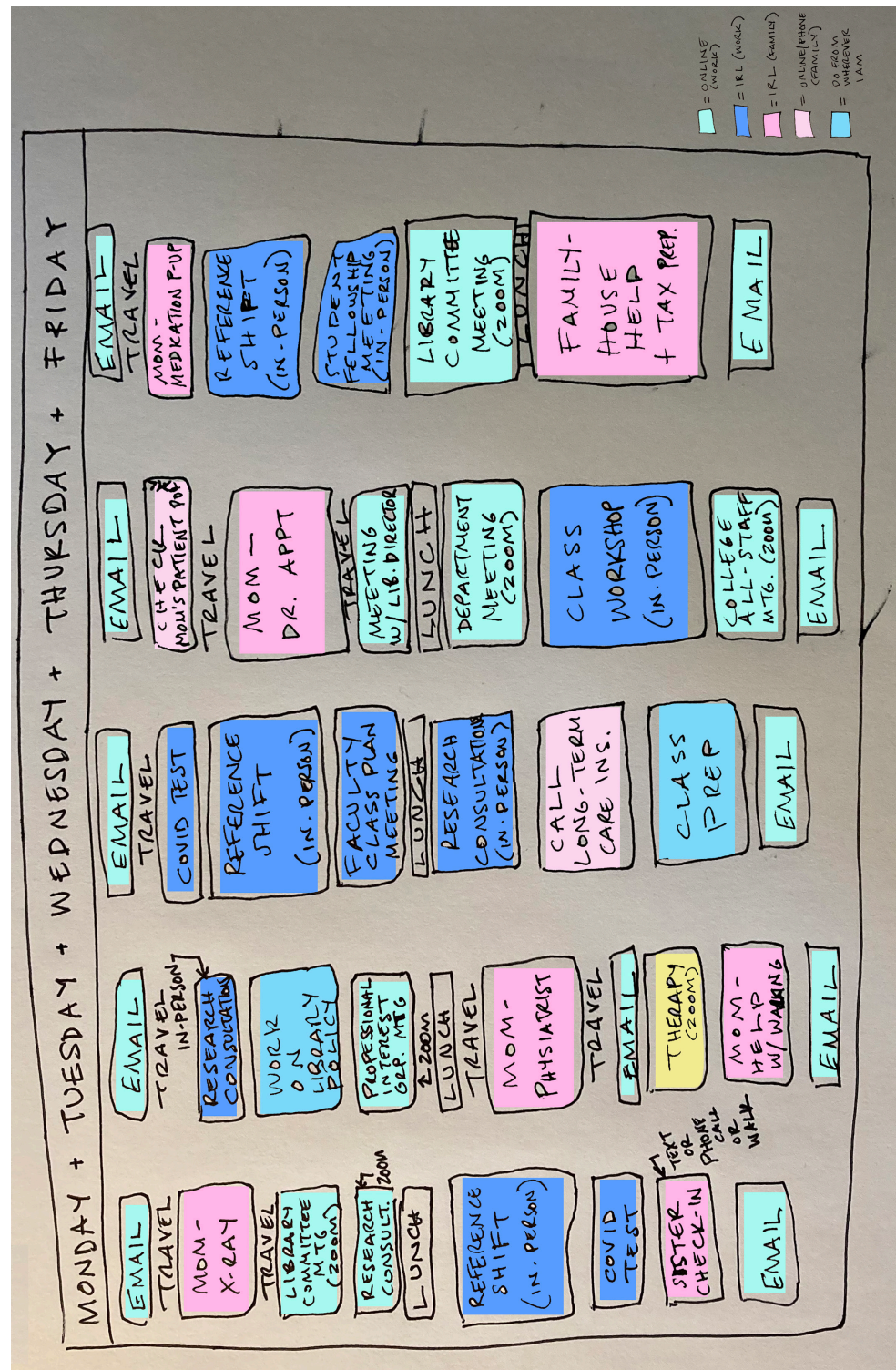
I went back to work when my son was four months old, and it was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. He's five years old now, and he's been home a lot more than expected over the past two years. I'm trying to think of this extra time I've been getting with him as making up for the time I didn't get to spend with him when he was so small. In some ways I feel lucky to get to spend this extra time with him, though of course I worry about what this will mean for him long term. As an only child with two introvert parents, how will he learn to make friends? And be around other people?



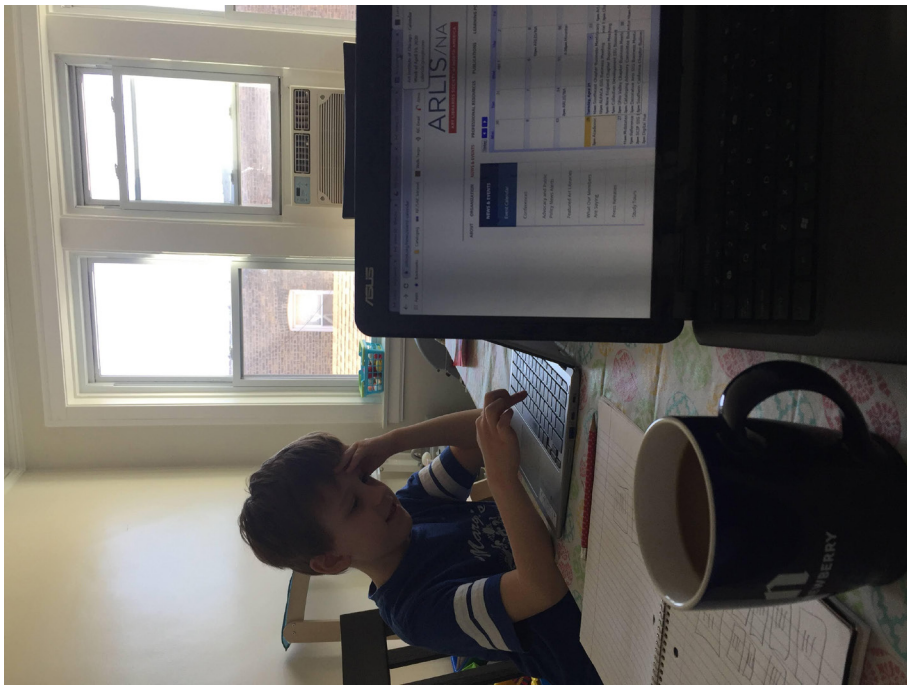
This is a photo of my 3 year old, Conor, at my makeshift desk at home in October 2021. Since the pandemic started, my archivist-partner and I have been working almost exclusively from home. My "temporary" office set up took over Conor's nursery in March 2020, when he was just about a year and a half old. Almost 2 years later we are still here! (Leah Sherman)



Meredith Kahn captured these pictures of me attempting to present some content in some sort of ARLIS meeting being interrupted by a small person with a stuffed watermelon. I remember being mortified, but now of course it seems completely normal that that happened, and something like it has happened many many times! (Jamie Vander Broek)



(Sara Smith)



(Stephanie Fletcher)

On a fairly typical day in October 2020, I broke down what my day was like so I would remember. Here's an excerpt of what my morning was like with one kid attending school from home and the other in person for part of the week, and my husband and I both trying to work from home. I want people to understand just how fractured time can be with kids around:

A day in the life - October 2020

6:30am

Wake up

Wake up kids

Make coffee

Make kids breakfast (after asking repeatedly what they want)

Pack one kid lunch

Remind kids to get dressed and brush teeth (x3 or 4)

Make sure 4th grader has everything she needs in her backpack for the day

Fill out and print 4th grader health screening form

Braid 2nd grader's hair and remind about teeth brushing

Send off 4th grader to school with father

Empty dishwasher and clean up kitchen from breakfast

Make sure 2nd grader is online for morning check-in

Eat breakfast

9:00am

Start workday

Also log on to Google Classroom and check personal email to see any new communications from school for each kid

Work for 5 minutes

Check in with 2nd grader to make sure she is doing what she's supposed to

Work for 5-10 minutes

Talk to 2nd grader to give her more things to do since she finished her worksheet

Double check schedule for next live meeting for 2nd grader

Try to focus back on work

Answer reference questions as they come in

Answer email questions from frustrated students, with compassion and understanding

Email triage

Review weekly list of tasks and to-do for things I've forgotten

Triage to-do list

Think about home stuff I've got to do

Think about dinner plans

Think about grocery list

Think about when I can get some exercise?

9:45am

Try to focus on priorities for the day for work

Twitter/news of the world (just because I wasn't sad enough)

Listen to musical glasses that the 2nd grader made (delightful!) and help her make and upload videos for her music teacher

10:00am

Office hours

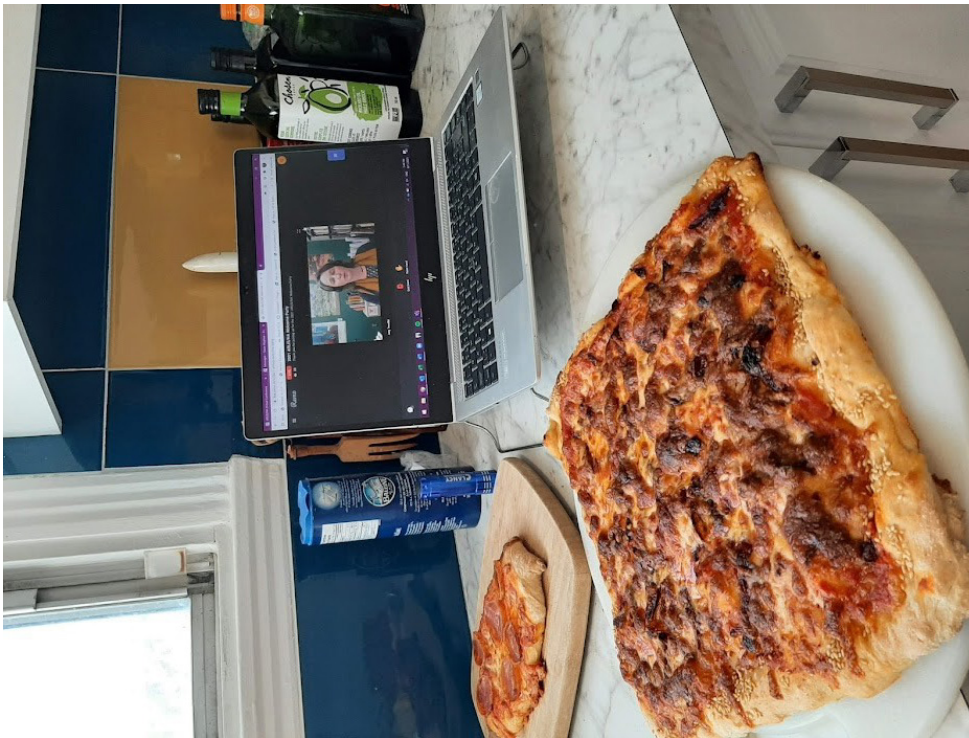
Text with friends to commiserate on how hard all this stuff is right now

Try to plan out the week ahead

Try to find some time to take off

Try not to cry as I think about missing my family

Making homemade pizza while watching the ARLIS conference closing ceremony:



(Gwen Meyhew)

ISOLATION NINJAS

I'M OWLA, I'M A FULL TIME SINGLE PARENT OF A 6-YEAR OLD AND A WORKING GRAD STUDENT



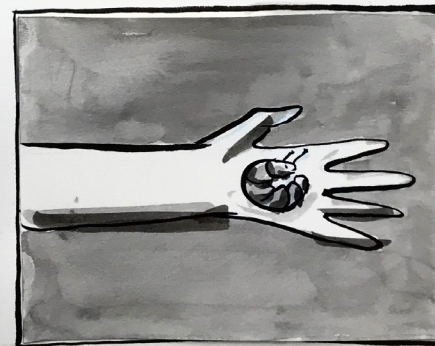
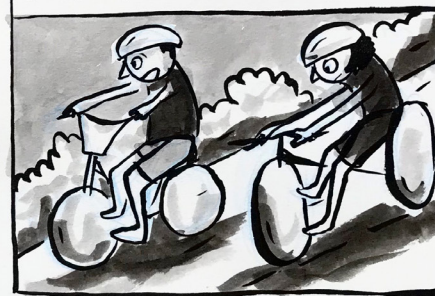
THE LOCKDOWN AND SOCIAL ISOLATION MEAN THAT MY SON & I ARE CUT OFF FROM THE COMMUNITY + RESOURCES WE NEED



I READ THE NEWS TOO MUCH.



GOOD THINGS HAPPEN, TOO...



What made you feel supported?

I've felt supremely supported by my workplace and supervisor--being able to work primarily from home during this time has made the flexibility I need as a parent so much more possible. I wish that this flexibility was extended to everyone in our organization, though I know it is not--a structural deficiency of academic libraries. On multiple occasions though, I have had to change instruction plans last minute because my son was either home sick or home on isolation--I am grateful to the instructors who worked with me on this and never took offense and grateful to my supervisor for understanding shifts I've needed to make.

Upper administration (from the library director on up) has never supported me as a working parent, not before the pandemic, not during it, and probably not after.

I felt supported when colleagues would make a point of smiling at and saying hello to my kids when they stuck their heads into my Zoom screen. The interruption wouldn't last more than a moment but the warmth that they were shown made a difficult situation a little bit less stressful and for that I am grateful.

I haven't. Except for when I went to care for my parent's apartment and make it ready for sale--and had made it very clear I was not in communication-- It has been made very clear that verbal support is there, but actual support is low.

I felt supported by my manager but the head of the library never addressed the issues facing parents during the pandemic. It would have been so helpful to have them ask how parents are doing. Even if there is not much they can offer to ease the load, recognition would have helped.

Lauren Scanlon
@owla__olar (Instagram)

What about flexible and/or remote work?

I hit on this above, but for those of us who are faculty at our institution, we have been given a tremendous amount of flexibility (at least in my unit), to work from home during this time. Furthermore, it has been expected. I appreciate this endlessly in the quest to keep my family safe.

Yes. I have allowed flexible and remote work. I am unable to be away from the office for almost any reason, however.

I think the pandemic showed us just how much of our work can be done remotely and flexibly, outside of the "9-5" structure, and that prioritizing in-person work simply because it was the way things were always done is foolish. The flexibility that came with remote work was kind of amazing as a parent (also just as a human being - being in control of my own time!) - I could actually pick my kids up at school when necessary, I could do stuff around home during the day when I needed a break, and I was able to show up for things at times that wouldn't have worked for me otherwise. I was more inclined to meet students online outside of regular working hours, or teach evening classes, since I wouldn't have to stay late physically at work and miss out on family time. The notion of working a set 8-hour block of time in our line of work is just too rigid to be practical, especially with two working parents and school-aged kids.

We have continued flexible hybrid work arrangements for the time being. This has been huge and the only reason that I have been able to juggle work responsibilities and also repeated school closures and kids home due to symptoms or close contacts. Our family schedule is still significantly disrupted and being able to only be on site when I need to be and to do more flexible work tasks remotely and/or at odd hours has meant the difference between being able to keep up the work and having to take leave. I sincerely hope that flexible hybrid work arrangements continue beyond the pandemic. They have greatly improved my work/life balance, allowing me to reclaim time from my commute and spend it with my family and sometimes on work projects or professional development, giving me less stress and more capacity. Now that we've seen that this can work, I see no reason to return.

We have a hybrid remote work schedule in place which is a great first step. What we are lacking is flexibility. All workers need flexible hours but especially parents who can't avoid childcare issues. I live far from work and picking up and dropping off a child near my home is impossible within working hours, especially now that I have more than one. I am grateful to be able to work at night or in the morning to make up that time.

Have you considered leaving the profession or your institution since the beginning of the pandemic? Describe what prompts these thoughts for you.

Yes. All of the above. I am tired. I am broken. And lately, with the latest surge, and my unvaxxed and unrepentant staff getting sick (again), I don't see an end. I cannot quit. I am the sole support of my family, now.

No.

YES YES YES YES YES YES YES. I did leave my institution. And I might leave my new institution. Library administrators expect us to go on or go "back to normal" as though nothing has happened. We are supposed to sacrifice ourselves and our families for the sake of the patrons. We are supposed to go back to work all day and sit at a desk and smile as though nothing has changed, no one is scared, as though that job and those library-goers are the REASON FOR LIVING. Sorry. No library patron and no library job is EVER going to mean more to me than my family. I am prepared to leave – and have left – an organization that will not support my family and will not allow me the time and energy I need to take care of my family.

I think about quitting at least once a day. Some days I think about it once per hour.

I have a rich fantasy life where there's enough money in our household for me to quit and not look back.

For the first month I would take naps and go for long walks, until my brain no longer felt like sludge.

It might take more than a month, tbh. Then I'd catch up on house projects, get some studio time here and there, and develop better, sustainable habits for me and my family. Once we found a new rhythm, and my brain started working again, I'd devote more of myself to all the creative projects I have had to put on hold. And then I remember, wait, I have what some people think is a dream job. I should appreciate this more. Wtf is wrong with me?

I submerged myself into librarianship, sinking head-first into online courses and tending to a full-time job that turned remote over the pandemic—a job I later resigned from, a job whose rocky substance was not leading me to what I sought. Leaving my job was freedom and uncertainty and solace during a strange time. I have not left the profession but I certainly vacated the room of a role long grown stale, depositing my employee proximity card like a hotel checkout before noon. Knowing that institutions will never love us means knowing that definitions of a librarian will shift and meld beneath my thumbs, a weird Model Magic that I need to take advantage of before it runs dry.

I often think of leaving the profession. Parents are struggling and have been pre-pandemic. **What parents need is support from management and education in cultural competency for coworkers.** When I returned from maternity leave, a former colleague monitored my hours and my workload and used it to complain to management and other coworkers about me. Even though this person left my office for another job, I am still demoralized by the experience. Mothers have enough guilt about how we divide our time, we don't need more guilt from our colleagues.

I considered leaving during the early days when trying to balance assisting a high needs child in elementary school with remote learning and also caring for a toddler whose daycare had closed, all while trying to work full-time remotely. As leaving wasn't financially feasible, I stuck it out, worked a lot of late night hours, and eventually we found a new normal. More recently, as pandemic disruptions to childcare continue and fatigue never seems to lift, I've considered leaving for a job closer to home to have family to help out more. **I love this job, but at what expense?**

a space for you _____

One morning in late March of 2020 I was trying to log on to a meeting of managers at my library while also trying to log my daughter onto her Zoom class while my husband was teaching online in another room. I was soon to submit my tenure packet and totally preoccupied with appearing as professional as possible in spite of the circumstances. I sat next to my daughter and logged us both into our respective meetings and failed to notice that my microphone was on, as my daughter squeezed close to me for a moment and said “I love you Mama” straight into the microphone of my headphones. I was mortified at the crack in my professional veneer, having interrupted this meeting with my personal life, but once the meeting was over, several colleagues messaged me to say that that bit of sweetness from my kid had made their day. It was a rare moment of comfort in those first awful weeks of quarantine.



I am optimistic that this breaking open of the illusions that work and life can exist separately will serve to push us along in the progress towards a work culture that actually works for working parents and caregivers.



I have seen others face this kind of adversity. I have seen them move through it and past it as I hope to do, but it just keeps continuing. Last week I was exhausted and took a few days. I was mostly out of communication, with no blowback, but I still had to work all my hours to catch up. Its not just me, other staff are doing similar things. We're all exhausted, we're all drained. And we're all doing our very best to make our pain not harm the community or it's library.



In the early days of the pandemic, working from home with a dress up and superhero loving three year old who absolutely insisted that I wear this cape while I worked. (Jessica Evans Brady)

JUST A REMINDER THAT WHEN
YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE A
FAILURE AT WORK BECAUSE
YOU CAN'T GET IT ALL DONE:

*Your worth is
not measured by
your productivity.*