

# **The Work of Holding a Home Together**

ENG 317 International Voices

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Some people imagine “work” as something that begins when you clock in and ends when you clock out. For me, work begins at 5 am., when my Autistic ten-year-old son wakes up and pads into the living room, turning on his favorite streaming service to watch videos of construction vehicles with songs that explain the different aspects and uses of each one. My eight-year-old daughter bursts into the room around 7 am. practically vibrating; her ADHD energy already three steps ahead of her body and ready to go. It’s about then that I pour myself another cup of coffee. And just when I think I have my hands full and the race to get ready for school is on, the toddler wakes up with the emotional range of an opera-singing T-rex stuck in a two-foot body.

This is my workplace. My home is my office, my break room, my conference table, and my performance review all in one. And the job, this work of caregiving, is both exhausting and sacred.

When Helena Norberg-Hodge (1993) describes the simple, interdependent rhythms of Ladakh in *Learning from Ladakh*, she writes about a community built on cooperation rather than competition. I reread that line often, reminding myself that my own household is its own tiny community – a messy, loud, unpredictable one, but stitched together by the necessity of teamwork. My children rely on me, true, but they also rely on one another in ways that are not always obvious. My son needs the predictability of breakfast at a certain time, the TV volume set precisely at 12 and his clothes to feel ok on his skin. My daughter needs to chatter through every step of pouring her cereal because talking helps her focus on what she is doing with her hands, while her mind goes through about 20 different outfit options. And the toddler? He needs to be held and hugged with no one making eye contact or speaking to him for at least 20 minutes because he wakes up like his father, slowly.

Some mornings, it feels like I'm juggling planets, or balls of water. But it is our rhythm. Slowly, clumsily and imperfectly, we cooperate, and we survive another day.

The work of motherhood, especially stay-at-home motherhood, often resists neat summaries. It is a job built on moments, tiny scenes that seem insignificant until you realize that they are the backbone of an entire life. One afternoon stands out so vividly to me, the rainy day when meltdowns turned into hugs. When cries of frustration turned into cuddles. My son couldn't handle the change in routine, my daughter was struck with cabin fever and ready to climb the walls and the toddler was feeding off of that energy and throwing everything, just creating chaos. At one point, I went to my room to join in the crying and have a moment, and when I came back my son was turning on his comfort video, and the toddler sat down and watched with him, snuggled into his lap and cuddling happily. My daughter asked to do my makeup. So while she stabbed my eyelids with her somehow sharp eyeshadow brush, the boys cuddled and I remember thinking to myself that this one small moment would be one that I hold onto forever. That one small moment in the chaos was perfection.

In *Flavio's Home*, Gordon Parks ( 1961) describes witnessing hardship up close, how poverty shapes the smallest details of life. The essay is heavy and intimate, and though my situation is different one line stays with me: his realization that survival itself can be work. Parenting children with different needs is a kind of survival and some days surviving is all I do. Thriving where possible, enduring when necessary, and constantly recalibrating what "success" looks like. Some days, success is simply making it to the end of day.

My work is measured in breakdowns.

A tantrum avoided because I anticipated a sensory trigger.

A full homework session completed without tears.

A toddler giggle that dissolves the heaviness of the morning and the stress of the day.

No paycheck arrives on Friday. No supervisor evaluates my multitasking or emotional labor (though we often refer to the toddler as the boss). Yet the meaning of this work in undeniable and equally undefinable. It is the work of shaping human beings, of guiding them, advocating for them, and loving them so fiercely that even the hardest moments are anchored by my singular purpose: to give them a better life.

Sometimes, during naptime or after bedtime, I think about the essays we read this week and how the writers approached the theme of working lives. Chitra Divakaruni (1997), in “Live Free and Starve,” writes about the tension between freedom and responsibility, and I feel a version of that tension myself. Motherhood both grounds me and stretches me thin. It limits my free time but expands my capacity to understand patience, resilience, and compassion.

I used to imagine “important work” as something visible—titles, promotions, achievements. Now, importance looks like the quiet moment when my daughter leans her head on my shoulder after a day of emotional ping-pong. Or when my son, after struggling for years to articulate feelings, says “I’m overwhelmed” instead of shutting down. Or when the toddler, covered in goldfish crumbs, sees me come out of the bathroom after 2 minutes apart and screams “MAMA” with his little arms splayed wide, begging to be picked up.

The central idea I return to is this: work is not defined by whether the world sees it. Work is defined by the way it shapes us and the way we shape others through it.

Being a stay-at-home mother to three very different children is the hardest job I've ever had. It's also the most creative nonfiction I will ever live in; messy scenes, complicated characters, plot twists, and all. And like the writers we read, I carry the hope that by telling the truth of my day, raw and real, I honor the work that often goes unseen, yet never stops.

## References

Divakaruni, C. (1997). *Live free and starve*. In **One world, many cultures** (pp. –). Pearson.

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