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Learned by Heart

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I remember saying after our first baby came, "I was afraid maybe all this talk about love was just so much iambic pentameter, but it's not! Love and marriage *are* wonderful, in any meter and in full measure."

by *Beth Cummings Paschal*

You ask whether you can have marriage and a career. Honey, let me reassure you — running a home and family is a career! Getting married and making a home is exciting business.

Upon my first return visit to my old editorial office, I remember saying with a wistful mixture of astonishment, disbelief and plain fatigue, "On my most ordinary day at home, I am twice as weary as on the most exhausting day at the office — say, a day you spend photographing." That was in the first blush of homemaking and mothering, when I still thought I could do everything myself and do it all every day. I didn't believe what I've learned since, that a cluttered house is bearable, nay even preferable, to a dashing, pushing-to-get-done wife and mother.

But I don't think I could have learned it any other way. As a matter of fact, it hasn't been so long since I've come to accept something less than perfection as my own "standard product" in homemaking. (Time out while I butter the baking bread, 10 minutes before time to take it out of the oven. Marie Stephens may have been in the Department of Textiles and Clothing, but I defy any nutritionist to bake a better loaf of bread than she can. She's my inspiration for baking better bread). Working out my own compromise with perfection is one of the things I had to learn by ear. I haven't a doubt

in the world, they taught us that in one or the other of those wonderful departments in home economics — say, child development or home management. Maybe it was all those years in my ivory tower, home economics journalism, reading step-saving, do-it-the-efficient-way copy. But I've finally

learned that you can be too busy making every minute count, doing at least two things at once. You know, put the clothes in the washer before you start breakfast; they can be washing while the food is cooking. If it's baked pork chops for supper, don't use the oven just for them and the sweet potatoes; bake a meat loaf too for the freezer. Wear yourself out saving time, electricity, steps. Saving everything but yourself sometimes. I do these things now — but the washer is not three flights down, and I don't have bottles and formula to do, so the meat loaf or extra baking is not so extra!

In North Carolina it's spring, you know, and we're not in the lambing season here in April, we are in the throes of what seem like a thousand-and-one other seasons. Annual reports, for one thing. Every well-intentioned organization to which equally well-intentioned I belong, calls for detailed annual reports each spring. The typewriter stays warm. (One of the few declarations of intentions I ever followed through on was the one I uttered when I got my first job on the staff of the Farm Journal magazine. Said I, "The first thing I am going to buy for myself is a portable typewriter." When I think of all the other declarations of

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Learned by Heart

Beth Cummings Paschal, H. Ec. JI. '39, lives in Raleigh, North Carolina, with her doctor husband, sons aged 10 and 5 and daughter 8. Before her marriage, Beth wrote the "Dear Polly" column for Farm Journal.

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intentions I've rehedged on, I breathe a sigh of relief and gratitude for having bought this faithful collection of machinery.) As I was saying before that parenthesis got me, annual reports, flower shows, spring festivals, television programs to write for Girl Scouts, television programs to help write, produce, and do for the North Carolina Museum of Art, a half-day a week at the Museum guiding not necessarily enthusiastic or responsive school children through, fifty a clip.

My Lambs

And there is that remnant shop I have to go by each day and don't quite get by. A spring coat and dress for daughter, a set of mother-daughter dresses — more because I like the look that comes into her eyes when she looks at the pair of dresses than because I think we have any business wearing alike-dresses — three lined pieces that can be assembled into a costume or swapped around with other "remnants" for Mother . . . these are some of the products recently off our sewing room assembly line. And oh yes, the yard. I don't mention it, I guess, because my conscience hurts me. Well, enough of this itemizing business. As I said, we're not lambing. Just say the Cub Scouts, the Midget Leagues, the Brownies, the pre-school crowd, and a busy husband with more outside responsibilities than I claim to have . . . they're my lambs and just keeping up with them would delay any response I may have wanted to dash off to you and that ingratiating letter of yours.

Graduate School

Upon those rare occasions when everything is going smoothly (and believe me, things get better and easier every year), I think, "This is what I was meant for!" And then again, there are other days when I remember another quote of mine, "I wish I could have majored in every department of home economics." Actually, I'm working my way through graduate school right now, with majors in education, psychology, housekeeping, nursing, experimental cookery, nutrition, institutional management, costume design, playground supervision, occupational therapy, interior design, landscaping and gardening, marketing and purchasing, chauffeuring, children, (delivered once obstetrically and forever by automobile) and mediating and moderating. Was it the inimitable Dr. Gaskill who endowed us with the phrase "patient repetition" in a course on advertising psychology? It's a phrase that every mother might as well take as her banner line; but there again, it takes a few years to resign yourself to it. (Or perhaps I am just more than ordinarily obtuse.)

The Power of Concentration

Another fact of life that had escaped me somewhere along the way is the fact that the power of concentration is a luxury. It is a thing of the past in a household of small extroverts, busy telephone and doorbell and push-button servants. In its place is the Battle of Constant Interruptions. We must have been warned about this too, but nobody can tell you. It's too unbelievable. This is one hazard upon which I managed to capitalize. I sold an article once on "How to Cook in

Snatches of Time." Cook I can, in snatches of time. Some sewing, perhaps, too. But writing is another matter. If this outpour of words seems labored at any time, only I will know how many times I spelled a word for anagrams, answered the telephone, the doorbell and the oven bell.

Confusing and exhausting, challenging and exacting. Homemaking is all of this. But that's not all it is. No pay check on earth could be your measure of success or your reward. When the littlest insists he has something for you and it turns out to be a big moist kiss; when the oldest magically does his homework without being told and maybe even double-checks it (I can dream, can't I); when the middle one defends compassionately a younger child in a neighborhood round-up; when they say, "Gee, Mom, you're a good cook" (though you know their father put them up to it); when they miss the one member of the family who is away working or visiting for more than the accustomed time and wish for him or her; when everybody is glad to be home; when they're glowing with health and bursting with energy, and loving and fighting, working and loafing . . . but growing in mind and heart toward what looks like more good things than otherwise; and when your husband combines a hard working day with pitching baseball, flying kites, mending dolls and growing flowers because he knows you like them, then you feel that maybe you've learned something along the way somehow. By hook, by laboratory, by ear and certainly by heart. Confusing and exhausting, yes; challenging and exacting, certainly. But oh so rewarding. That's homemaking.

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