

1 © Prepare to Change the Plan

Proud to Be Average—Avoiding the Super Woman Syndrome

I was born three weeks early—an hour after my identical twin sister. It was the only time I had a womb of my own. This tendency for Hett and me to operate in our own time zones has followed us throughout life. We cannot blame our parents; they and the rest of our family are organized, punctual, and always prepared. Our sisters and brother maintained their rooms in a style praised by our Boy Scout Leader dad and Brownie Leader mom.

From a young age, Hett and I preferred a more casual approach to our surroundings. This we illustrated by yanking bars off the side of our cribs, curtains from their rods, and clothes from our drawers. I can imagine the conversations we had: “What shall we rip apart today? These bars are too confining. Let’s go for a more open look.” Signs of remodeling urges to come?

We did share the scholastic gene passed down from our father’s father, a high school teacher. Our older sisters were models of this as well, and both have become teachers too. At the age of six we began poring over our *World Book Encyclopedia* set to prepare our first research reports. Afternoons often found us in the library in Roxboro, Quebec, where we absorbed all the facts we could find, from the camouflages of insects to the origin of babies. Then we raced home on our bikes to the smell of a casserole being pulled from the oven, escaping the chore of setting the table.

Teachers at nearby West Park Elementary praised our resourcefulness and thoroughness, but were less enthusiastic about the sixteen late slips our first year of school. Entrusted with walking to school from a young age, the lure of snow forts and prime snowball-making conditions proved too great a temptation to stay on task. Despite our love of the outdoors, the one task that needed little prodding was homework. Our mom often encouraged us to pursue more enjoyable tasks like cleaning our room, but we were more likely found propped on the floor with our notebooks, watching the latest Get Smart sitcom, or sneaking a book under the bed covers after lights-out.

Assuming the more time spent working the better the grade, we plunged into projects the minute they were assigned. Finding the work when we were done was a bigger challenge than completing it. Platitudes from family members such as “a place for everything and everything in its place” often fell on deaf ears but in time we managed to submit all work, skip a grade, and complete college by the age of twenty.

These early organizational habits proved pertinent later in life when I landed my first jobs in library science and textbook publishing. Initially I looked up to my efficient sales colleagues in awe but within a few years was promoted to territory manager, handling hundreds of accounts of my own. I have learned that we each have our own style and there are many recipes to success. Some will walk the straight and narrow while others forge a more creative route to get there.

Growing up with an identical twin was like having all your best strengths and worst traits reflected in a mirror. Eventually I became a mother and now see my single-minded focus reflected in my son Kyle. Then my second son Nico came along who reminds me of the secretary type that I am not. Sometimes we think our mirror is distorted; we want it to reflect another person. But we don't realize that person may look at us with the same wish!

Hett, now a hospice worker, once attended a workshop where the manager instructed each employee to complete a personality profile. The leader then asked, “Who would you most want to be like?”

Hett chose the woman next to her, whom she admired for her planning skills, and the same co-worker chose Hett, longing for more of her spontaneity.

My engineer husband Sam is a consummate planner, whereas I am more free-spirited, like my twin. My second career as a substitute teacher offers the perfect chance to combine both styles—each new classroom setting is an opportunity to follow a plan and at the same time “go with the flow.” Flexibility is useful when little or no direction is provided. I have stepped in for teachers who were unable to put pen to paper as they were suddenly overcome by vertigo. I have entered classrooms that teachers had fled moments before when besieged by an unexpected stomach virus. Teacher notes have ranged from hastily scribbled scratches on an index card to elaborate seven-page instruction manuals that include how many crackers to dispense at recess to how many pages to read of the current novel. Elaborate discipline systems are suggested: dispensing cards or moving student names up a yardstick, color-coded by behavior type.

I always assumed that teachers had to remain orderly at all times, and that this trait was programmed into their DNA. And then I discovered classrooms where great learning was obviously taking place amid the cheerful clutter that prevailed. Projects dangled from ceilings or filled every inch of the walls. Instructor manuals were buried under piles of papers and locating supplies required a treasure hunt. As one well-loved teacher assured me —“My students know where everything is.” I have gained inspiration in every type of classroom.

Parent Teacher’s Association (PTA) board meetings are also organizational laboratories. You cannot appreciate the amount of planning that goes into producing a major event unless you spearhead a key committee. PTA board members and parent volunteers often juggle part-time jobs along with family and school commitments. Some achieve all this masterfully as they build community spirit, fight for enrichment programs, host seasonal teacher luncheons, and coordinate fundraisers—often with toddlers in tow or baby in utero. Volunteer-of the-year selections are always a challenge since the bar is set so high.

When my oldest son, Kyle, first started elementary school I used to stare in wonder at these efficient moms. How did they serve tirelessly at school and still manage to wear matching socks and eye makeup? Noticing my deflated look one day, a staff member wrapped me in a hug and said, “We love you just the way you are!” From then on I decided to stop comparing myself to others.

To contribute to society we need not toil from dawn until dusk, the way I used to tackle schoolwork. This book is about thriving—not just surviving—in the kitchen of life. It is a guide for people who juggle many plates and are human enough to drop one occasionally. And it is for those who already know how to juggle and can learn new tricks from others. Hopefully it will remind us all to enjoy the beauty of our plates even when we break a few chips off the edges.

Lessons from Kindergarten—What Five-Year-Olds Taught Me about Life

There is no better way to test planning skills than with teaching a kindergarten class. Ever since I first dated my husband Sam, an engineer like my father, his mantra has been “Make a schedule” and “Have a system.” Kindergarten teachers are masters at developing these. If you change any routine in kindergarten, you will receive immediate feedback.

Originally buoyed by the idea of a job that would enable me to work day and night, I pursued an Elementary Education major in college. While I had always longed to share my love of learning, I worried that I did not fit the profile of a typical teacher. I chose a textbook sales career instead—hoping teachers would be easier to control than students.

Expect the Unexpected

Twenty-five years after graduating from college, I found myself back in front of a classroom in Santa Clara, California, having been encouraged by my son Nico’s third-grade teacher to obtain a substitute