



4-1-1987

### Role Strain in Dual-Career Marriages: A Personal Account

Larry Halvorsen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Halvorsen, Larry (1987) "Role Strain in Dual-Career Marriages: A Personal Account," *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*. Vol. 13 : No. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/irp/vol13/iss1/4>

This Article or Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

---

---

## ROLE STRAIN IN DUAL-CAREER MARRIAGES: A PERSONAL ACCOUNT

---

---

Larry Halvorsen, PhD

When I was asked to participate in this session as a discussant, it was suggested that I comment on my experience with dual-career marriages as a bishop, as a nonpsychologist lay person, and as a husband. After considerable reflection, I could not think of any dual-career marriage problems I had dealt with as bishop. The research in the literature I read offers no extensive case studies, and so I hope that I can be most helpful in the discussion by describing for you my experience as a husband, focusing particularly on the transition from traditional to dual-career marriage. I will try to be relatively objective, and you will, I am sure, add appropriate amounts of salt to correct for distortions.

My own family was traditional in the sense that my father earned all the money and my mother supported his career. His schedule while I was growing up began at 7:15 a.m., when he left the house after a large breakfast that my mother prepared. He returned around noon for lunch, often with an unexpected guest, came again for supper around 7:00 p.m.—we almost always waited for him—and then left again for an evening of professional activities. He often returned home after midnight. When I was three, my maternal grandmother moved in with us, due to ill health, and did not pass away until I was on a mission. She took on the tasks of light housekeeping and baking and some other cooking, so there were really two women supporting the household during my growing-up years.

My wife, Mary, also grew up in a traditional family. Her parents immigrated from Germany when she was five and eventually had seven children. Her father was a carpenter. He left early in the morning, returned for dinner, which was served promptly at 5:15, ate, put on a suit, and went to the church for evening meetings. He served as bishop of his ward for nine years and as stake president for another

nine years, so that all of the children remember his being at work or church most of the time.

We married when both of us were juniors in college. I was 25 and Mary was 22. Both of us expected to live as our parents had lived, although Mary has since said that she always hoped otherwise. We worked during our senior years in college, and I then applied to graduate school with Mary's enthusiastic support. I was admitted to an Ivy League university, and she resigned herself to a surrogate pleasure in my continuing education and career. When we left for my graduate studies, she still needed to complete 23 credits for an undergraduate degree. I had a generous fellowship, and she worked as a secretary for four years to round out our income. She did not continue her studies at that time. We both remember those years as a marvelous and relatively carefree period. We had a splendid social life, plenty of money, and lots of freedom to roam New England on weekends.

Children were not forthcoming, so after five years of marriage, we adopted a baby boy and began planning our rose-covered cottage. Six weeks after the arrival of our first son, Mary became pregnant and gave birth to a second son almost exactly a year younger than the first. Two weeks later, we left for Los Angeles and my new position at the University of California. The next few years turned the bliss of the first five into distress. Our oldest son was active and aggressive; the second was passive. He took his first steps at seventeen months. The two were engaged in a constant power struggle that filled the house with strain and tension. Mary, in the meantime, had begun taking English literature classes at the University of California. She dreamed of changing her original major from child development to English.

Other strains followed. In an effort to regain our carefree years, we took off one fall weekend and drove to Salt Lake City for general conference. Mary stayed on for a visit while I returned to Los Angeles. One afternoon, while alone in her parents' home, she fell down the stairs while carrying our oldest son and broke her leg in three places—a classic spiral fracture. She was carried onto the plane home on a stretcher and was immobilized in our new multi-level home while her leg took six months to heal.

In a second venture, I took a year's leave of absence from my job, and we went to England with our two young sons, ages three and two. We began the stay with a camping tour of Europe. I can still see both kids screaming on the hot pavement on the first of July in Florence, and our oldest son biting a hole in the seat of our new car because he was tired of riding in it. Our much-dreamed-of camping trip

through Europe came to an end when Mary contracted pneumonia. We retreated to a hotel after 20 days of sitting in the dust of European campgrounds eating packages of dried Knorr soup while wealthy Germans pulled up alongside in their VW campers and trailers. While I have pleasant memories of the remaining time, I also remember Mary's despair at being left with the children while I went to archives in London.

When we returned to Los Angeles, I began the traditional sweating for promotion and tenure while Mary stayed home and gave birth to our third son. We moved into a grand new house, which we both loved. Our eldest son entered school, followed the next year by his brother, and a time of relative peace and respite set in. Our third son was gentle and easy to care for. Mary continued taking night classes at the University of California, but the strain on her was taking its toll on me. I found myself babysitting and fixing dinner more and more in the evenings while she read novels, prepared for exams, and wrote papers. In the meantime, I was made chairman of my department, which meant additional administrative pressures. I was 37 and Mary was 34.

Tensions continued to mount, and I began feeling the ground shifting under me. Our oldest son, Max, had become increasingly difficult. He beat on his brother, was unruly with friends, and one day drove his piano teacher out of the house. I felt anxious as Mary found herself more and more enamored with school and talked about how attractive and brilliant this, that, or the other professor was. I began having deep fears of being abandoned.

Within two years we moved from our dream house to a home in a better school district. The new home was stressful because it needed a great deal of renovation. I promised Mary I would fix it up and make it attractive. Six weeks later, I was called to be bishop in a ward where I knew almost no one. My house-renovating days were over. Mary continued the repairs on her own, continued taking classes at the University of California, and we both continued in combat with Max, who by now had become violent and destructive. I was 39 and Mary was 36.

A period of incredible strain for me set in. I was reelected chairman of my department, and I had started a major project in the area for a series of exhibitions, lectures, programs, and books. At church, young families were in crisis, and I found myself on many evenings and weekends at the bishop's office listening to their problems. I wondered whether Mary and I could stand the pressure. One Sunday afternoon, as I sat in my bishop's office listening to a couple planning

their divorce, the phone rang. Mary called to say that Max had slugged someone or other and that she was ready to leave. She didn't, but we both knew we were in over our heads with him and ourselves.

Max, meanwhile, took his aggressions to church. I walked into the foyer one evening for Mutual activities to find all of the youth of the ward, and their teachers, gathered in a circle. Max was sitting on another boy, calling him the F-word, and threatening to beat him to a pulp. We went off to get counseling for ourselves, and frankly I felt humiliated. Paul's admonition rang over and over again in my mind: "A bishop must be one who manages his own household well and wins obedience from his children." Mary, in the meantime, gave birth to our fourth child.

Now the costs of our home renovations, a new baby, and counseling caught up with us. Mary went to work as a corporate secretary, leaving our baby with a friend in the ward. She despaired over leaving the baby but enjoyed the respite from home life. She continued taking courses. I continued teaching, chairing my department, running the arts project, and being bishop. My anxieties about Mary abandoning me continued to mount, however, as she found new friends at work and men began to hang around her desk. I was terrified when the personnel director—a man in his early sixties with a great deal of poise—invited her to lunch to talk about her future. I envisioned him luring her into a hotel room. As it turned out, he was curious about her interests and asked why she wasn't pursuing a career in writing. She had now finished her undergraduate degree. I was 40 and Mary was 37.

To my horror, she announced that she wanted to quit her job and enter graduate school, which she did with tremendous support from our therapist. Our financial situation became tight. We sold our house, borrowed money from the sale, and moved into a more maintenance-free home. The next two years were filled with even greater stress on me. While I was working through my anxieties about being abandoned and tying that into my relationship with my father, Mary had taken to graduate school like a duck to water. She seemed enthralled with her Shakespeare professor, a young, single male from Yale, who admired her as well. She seemed fascinated with another professor, a Marxist, who was arrested for protesting at a military installation. Worst of all, I thought, she was too amused by a talk that a prominent lesbian in the English Department gave.

I was a nervous wreck. Mary was understanding of my plight, but her assurances brought me little comfort. Finding support in friends and counselors, I sought to reassess myself. I had grown increasingly

dissatisfied with my job. I found a wonderful adviser in the student counseling office at the university. She gave me a battery of personal inventory tests, and I discovered that I had neglected my creative side. I enrolled in an oil painting course and then two sculpture courses, and began spending long hours in a studio that I set up in the basement.

Financial pressures mounted again, and Mary went back to work after completing most of her credits for a master's degree. Our oldest son, in the meantime, had not responded either to our therapy or to his own. After a bout with physical violence, we faced the fact that we had chosen him in adoption, but that he had not yet chosen us. He needed to have a chance to make that decision. We sent him off to my elderly mother, who smothered him with what he had always wanted: the attention of an only child. He hated it. But he also didn't know how to fight with her—his brothers weren't around to beat on—and he began to settle down.

The last quarter of Mary's graduate education, I must say, was pure hell. She completed 15 credits of German through an intensive evening course, worked full time, and taught early morning seminary. My term as department chairman had now come to an end, as had my five-year term as bishop. I respectfully declined my stake president's invitation to join the high council—I'd rather have died at that point. I was 45 and Mary was 42.

The end of my chairmanship brought financial losses, and Mary continued to work full time. Her stable income was short-lived. She received a call from a publisher asking to print a children's book she had written. They wondered if she would accept a check for \$3,000 as a payment for the manuscript. She accepted and quit her job. With \$1,800 of the money, we bought a new Macintosh, and Mary prepared to enter a novel-writing contest, for which the deadline was a postmark of December 31, six weeks away. She had written half of a novel for her master's project. In six weeks of day-and-night fury, she completed the second half, which she had been carrying around in her head. We put the manuscript in the mail at 4:55 p.m. on December 31. "I'm going to win," she assured me. "I can feel it." I remained skeptical.

A week later, we left for Seattle and a visiting professorship for me. In May, Mary learned that her book was one of two winners in a field of 800 contestants. On the same day, I was offered a professorship at the University of Washington. We gratefully received the book prize money to pay off one of the several Visa bills we had acquired for educational expenses. By June, Mary had also been offered a position teaching writing in a liberal arts college, so in September of that

year we both entered new jobs. I was 46 and Mary was 43. Our oldest son, in the meantime, had decided that the family was more important than he had thought and moved back in with us. His grades, incidentally, in the past school year have risen to a 3.8 average, and he plans to enter college in the fall. You may be interested in how we now try to balance our lives. I kept a little journal this past week to describe it. Here is the entry for last Sunday, March 29:

I got up early, prepared my Sunday School lesson and a turkey for dinner while Mary prepared for her Sunday School class and went to choir practice. I hate choir and would rather fix dinner. At church we were asked to be in charge of the ward spring dance. We accepted and divided up responsibilities. Mary will take decorations, publicity, and food. I will take set-up, take-down, and clean-up. We ate dinner after church. I took a nap while Mary prepared a light supper for guests. We spent Sunday evening with them.

Many would ask me why I have supported this dual-career venture. I must say that I didn't support it—certainly not at the outset. I argued with Mary that she was bright and talented and shouldn't place so much emphasis on finishing school. On one occasion, while I was still in graduate school and she was complaining about not having a college degree, I sent her into another room and prepared a diploma from H.I.T., Halvorsen Institute of Technology. I sat down at the piano, played "Pomp and Circumstance," and asked her to march in. She was amused, but not for long.

Later I had to weigh the costs of having a wife who was dissatisfied with her life against my personal sacrifices necessary to support her self-fulfillment. Kohlberg would not have rated my moral motivations very high. I conceded initially out of a sense of self-preservation and not out of altruism.

I hope that my thinking has matured somewhat in the intervening years, especially since I have watched, almost with envy, the great happiness Mary's achievements have brought, not only to herself but to our entire family: The question I wish I could have asked years ago, but was afraid to, is this: "Is it not possible for a family organization to support all of its members in realizing their potential?" That, it seems to me, is one of the fundamental questions of religion. To answer "no" to that question is to deny ourselves our own eternal progression.

*For privacy, all names and other identification data in this article have been changed.*