

My Recession

By Amy Mayer '94

MY SON picked and ate a green bean and raced off to choose one of the giant sunflowers growing nearby. We'd take it home with the rest of the beans and tote bags brimming with greens, squash, carrots, cucumbers, tomatoes, and other fresh organic vegetables. It was our weekly summer ritual that year, and although we stretched to pay for the farm share over the winter, in the summer of 2009, I welcomed the prepaid food. We were broke, but we ate well.

Elias was four that summer, and I spent much of it single parenting. I am a freelance writer, and my partner is a doctoral candidate. We have flexible schedules, and when Elias was little we divvied up child care pretty evenly. Things shifted as Elias grew older, but even doing more child care I managed to grow my business. Then two things happened: The Great Recession ransacked the publishing industry, and my partner, Beth, spent two months doing shipboard research in the Bering Sea.

That summer, I worked fewer hours, and getting assignments took longer. The reality that Beth was our primary breadwinner forced me to take stock of my situation.

I've never had a permanent, full-time-with-benefits-and-paid-vacation job. The feast or famine reality of self-employment is the yin to the yang of working my own hours and never having to attend staff meetings. Still, the stats were grim. In the first six months of 2008, I sent out 35 invoices; for that same period in 2009, the total was 15. Week after week, the expenses exceeded the income. Beth e-mailed daily, thanking me for holding down the fort, but I saw myself coming up short professionally. Surely even the Wellesley grads who never took Econ 102 know that it's not sustainable to spend more than you earn. It's utterly demoralizing when you're working hard but not earning enough.


With Beth away, I decided that reducing our expenses might be a more realistic goal than earning more. But saving money takes time and effort—and it clearly isn't a career move. Would I let down Mother Wellesley if I used my "work time" to turn farm-share kale into something edible? (I hate kale, but clearly I couldn't waste it.) I tried to finish building a clothesline Beth

had started, and the result was disastrous. I scoffed at people who made their own yogurt—then I did the math. Now, every couple of weeks I'm pouring half a gallon of milk into a heavy pot and monitoring the temperature. Once it's been heated and cooled appropriately, I stir in a quarter-cup of old yogurt and stick the whole pot in a barely warm oven. The next morning I have two quarts of yogurt.

Beth and I consciously decided a couple of years ago to prioritize her work over mine, so she could finish her degree. I never contemplated the emotional impact of that decision. The recession hastened the economic one: a great disequilibrium in our earning. I'm not sure how I could have prepared myself for the change, even in retrospect. I didn't leave the workforce voluntarily or unexpectedly get laid off. Rather, I gradually worked less and had the income to prove it. I valued the time with my son, but it was sometimes tinged by the stresses on our budget. I repeated a mantra I'd often heard, "When I'm old, I won't look back and say, 'Gee, I wish I'd spent more time working when my son was little.'" But a part of me wished I was working more.

Beth's shipboard pay got delayed. Small checks came in from my work, but I turned to credit cards. Then, two of Beth's professors loaned us money, which hit my ego hard. I certainly appreciated a short-term, no-interest loan in place of credit-card debt, though, no matter how humbling.

As Elias and I enjoyed our trips to the farm, I realized organic, local produce would strike many as indulgent. Sometimes I even questioned our priorities. But that's where education—and math—matters in the face of low income: We can make informed spending decisions. If they deviate from some social norm, or from those made by others in our tax bracket, we don't mind. For us, a farm share is a necessity, and broken down over the year, it's also a bargain. Cell phones for each of us and a second car we can skip. At times we feel "poor," but we know that we earn more than many, many Americans and we remind ourselves frequently that we have made this choice—and it is temporary. Elias started kindergarten this year. My work hours increased slightly, and our childcare costs evaporated. Soon, Beth will finish school and have a job that pays much more.

There have been low points, and bounced checks, but I cherish this truth: I choose not to hold down a "real" job, knowing that I could if I ever had to. But I'd still use the clothesline Beth finished this spring and make my own yogurt. Doing it ourselves saves us about 75 percent on the cost. It may not take a Wellesley degree to do that math, but I think Mother Wellesley would be proud. 

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