Failure Of 'Superwoman' Role

2/18.0

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LIV ULLMANN IS 40. Her daughter, Linn, 13.

Liv Ullmann is thinking about having another baby. Within the next two years, if the man is right and the situation is right, the actress told writer Susan Berman in a recent interview, she might do it.

She says having and raising and being with Linn constitute "my most valuable life experience." There are times, she says, "when we are almost like an ordinary family . . . I try to be with her as much as possible, but she knows I must work."

When decades end, it is characteristic of journalists to hunker up to typewriters and ponder the 10 years that have passed. Female journalists in the first days of 1980 have been writing a great deal about women in the 1970s, about women turning 30 or 40 and having careers and babies and being tired.

"The girl who was told that when she grew up she should get married and have children and keep house," wrote columnist Ellen Goodman in the first days of 1980, "is now a grown-up woman being told she should be married, have children, keep house and a job, or better yet, a career.

"While mothers at home have felt increasingly pressured for 'not working,' mothers in the workforce feel increasingly pressured by the double burden."

Betty Friedan, founding mother of American feminism, the woman with the knack for predicting trends, started talking about it earlier, toward the end of the '70s, when it was becoming increasingly clear to more and more women that something wasn't working the way it was supposed to.

"We have to learn," Friedan said in 1978, "how to make equality livable without having a lot of tired women."

"We told our daughters you can have it all," Friedan said in 1979. "Well, can they have it all? Only by being superwoman. Well, I say no to superwoman!"

Her audience of superwomen applauded.

"I used to take pride in being a superwoman," said one. "Now I see it not as a personal victory but as a failure. A failure of the work world, maybe even a failure of the society that just isn't adjusting to the way we live."

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IT'S 6 A.M., AND THE alarm goes off as usual. I get up as usual, shut my daughter's bedroom door so she can sleep some more, turn on the heater, start the coffee, fix the orange juice. Then I shower, get dressed, start breakfast, unload the dishwasher of last night's dinner dishes. It's still dark when I go outside to get the paper.

At 7 a.m. I wake my daughter, who is 2 years old and sleeping peacefully. She does not want to get up, though she objected vociferously to going to bed last night. I turn off her night light and open the drapes.

I reason with her as best one can reason with a 2-year-old. She does not want to get dressed. It takes 10 minutes to coax, wrestle and otherwise hassle her out of her pajamas and into some clothes. I'm perspiring when we finish, she is angry and crying. I hate myself for having to drag her out of bed.

When I don't have to work, we nuzzle, snuggle, drink our orange juice when we feel like it. On weekends, her father fixes sumptuous breakfasts in front of the fireplace; we read the paper, maybe watch "Sesame Street" or read "The Cat in the Hat." I have found, at her own pace, by her inner clock, she likes to get dressed around 9 or 10. Many times, she does it earlier, even willingly.

BUT THIS IS TUESDAY, not Saturday, and not Christmas vacation. Papa, who also rose at 6, has to leave at 7. "Hollldddd me, Maaamaa!" she wails. "Rock-a-bye baby me, Mama!" And I, who bought the super-

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woman myth sight unseen, feel sad and very tired. Because there is nothing I would rather do, right now, than rock-a-bye baby. But we don't have time.

Time, of course, is what it's all about. Superwomen, supermothers, keep calendars and notebooks and lists. We keep lists of groceries and lists of birthdays and baby sitters and housekeepers if we can afford them and preschools if our children are potty-trained. We keep lists of clothes to buy and shirts to mend, not to mention business appointments that have to be kept and deadlines to be met. In the end, we find ourselves keeping lists of lists.

It's 7:15 a.m., and the sun is starting to come through the fog. I open the rest of the drapes so the houseplants can get some light and because I don't like to come home to a house where the drapes have been closed all day. I consider getting rid of the houseplants.

BREAKFAST IS SIMPLE — soft-boiled eggs and toast, or oatmeal, or muffins and fruit, or dry cereal and fruit — but it still makes a mess. Sometimes she eats, sometimes she doesn't. Often she pours milk on the table or sticks her hand in the honey jar. This morning she wants to sit on my lap. "You feed me, Mama," she says. There is a new baby at the sitter's house, and she sees this new baby getting all this attention that babies necessarily get. No matter that she has been feeding herself for quite a long while.

It's now 8 a.m., I've been up for two hours and I haven't even read the paper — this paper, the one I've worked for going on 11 years, nearly nine of them without the responsibilities of motherhood. I notice it's not a very thick paper today, but I still don't have time to read it. (An editor asked me that morning about a story in another morning paper, and I looked at him like he was crazy. It's not his fault he didn't know why.)

I'm now 15 minutes behind schedule. I stick some dishes in the dishwasher. She doesn't want to put on her jacket, but I put it on her anyway. I get my briefcase and purse, make sure I turned off the heater, the oven, the stove and my curling iron, make sure her socks match and she has an extra change of clothes.

THE LAST THING I always do before leaving the house is check to see if I have on shoes. I remember some years back, before I knew about such things, when a woman I know, who combined an exemplary career with the raising of three children, forgot to put her shoes on. She came to work in furry bedroom slippers. I offered to go home and get her some shoes. She tucked her feet under her desk and hoped nobody would give her an assignment before I got back.

My drive into town these mornings takes about 25 minutes. My brown-eyed pal is pretty quiet today. "I mad at you, Mama," she announces. "Mama has to go to work," I tell her, thinking about the woman down the street who used to get up at 5 a.m. to get her two kids to the sitter so she could be at work by 7. She remembers giving them grilled ham and cheese sandwiches in the car.

My small pal has been luckier. I went back to work when she was 10 weeks old, and she has been cared for in the two-plus years since by a wise and soothing woman who takes wonderful care of babies and I'm quite certain would die for mine.

So it's not that my pal doesn't like to go there. It's just that there are times when she doesn't like to be rushed.

FOR REASONS OF space, I will dispense with an accounting of the rest of the day. Suffice it to say it doesn't get much better. Time must be scheduled with extraordinary care. Coffee breaks foregone, lunch grabbed at one's desk or during a business meeting, alternate baby-sitting arrangements always at ready, vacations planned around preschool holidays or sitters' time off.

I love my work, don't get me wrong. And it should be noted here that my husband, who cooks much better than I and cleans bathrooms beautifully, does considerably more around the house than the national studies show most husbands of working mothers do. But, like it or not, whether it's cultural conditioning or inherent in the genes, mamas do more for babies than papas do. Like it or not, cooperative husbands or not, if we want to combine the enormous pressures — and huge rewards — of raising children, with the pain and pleasure of a demanding career, we are going to have it very rough.

There are going to be many times when we want to be with our children and cannot. There are going to be times when we have to sacrifice our work to stay home with a sick child. There are going to be times when we are so tired we will wonder if we shouldn't just quit and stay home — if we could afford it, which increasing numbers of American families cannot.

THE WOMAN AT THE Friedan speech who told Ellen Goodman that society "just isn't adjusting" to the radical restructuring of the American family was right. It isn't. There isn't enough quality child care. There aren't sufficient support services — appliance repair services, for example, which will come on Saturday — for working families. Many men are slow to change. And many women persist in the mistaken notion they can have, and do, it all.

Friedan also said when I interviewed her in 1978 that the American women's movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s sparked "an incredible passion that no woman who experienced it would want to give up," and she's right too about that.

There really is no going back, nor I think would the majority of women want to. But perhaps there can be found some middle ground between the old way and the new. Some middle ground where women will not suffer the devastation of those postwar mothers in "The Feminine Mystique" — asking, as they lay by their husbands at night, "Is this all?" — nor the grim fatigue of today's mythical superwomen, who fall into bed at night and ask, "Is this the way it has to be?"