

Instead of having it all, a call for all to have

Heidi Schlumpf | Sep. 12, 2012



Edmund Butler and Heidi Schlumpf with their children, Sam and Sophie Butler

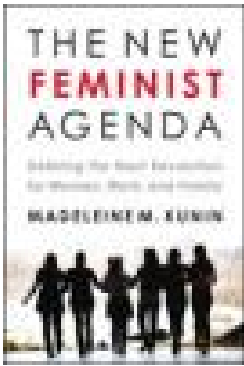
In a departure from the norm, NCR was sufficiently intrigued by a recent book to ask three of our younger married writers to review it. As a bonus, we asked the reviewers if they would mind introducing us also to their families. -- Arthur Jones, books editor

Earlier this summer, a number of friends (Facebook and otherwise) began "liking," forwarding and otherwise commenting on an article in *The Atlantic* magazine with the depressing title, "Why Women Still Can't Have It All."

I bookmarked Anne-Marie Slaughter's article for future reading. Weeks later I still hadn't had time to check it out. It turns out that part of the "all" I can't have, as a mother of two toddlers who works full time outside the home, includes time to read articles about how busy my life is.

Or perhaps I was avoiding it because I knew it would only encourage me to reflect how I feel like a failure in my attempts to juggle career, marriage and parenthood. Eventually, I finally got around to checking it out -- at 4 a.m. during a bout of insomnia on my vacation. I kid you not. That's apparently when I have "free" time.

Turns out I agree with author Slaughter's argument that many working mothers today are not convinced that "having it all" -- a high-level, successful career and a family -- is all the feminists before us promised it would be. While a minority of women can make it work, most of us are hanging on by a thread, if that. So please don't tell us we're not committed enough, didn't marry the right person or didn't have kids at the right age if we are torn between ballet recitals and the boardroom.



Slaughter is among dozens of working mothers who share their struggles of trying to balance

work and family in *The New Feminist Agenda: Defining the Next Revolution for Women, Work, and Family* by Madeleine M. Kunin, the first woman governor of Vermont and former deputy secretary of education and ambassador to Switzerland under Bill Clinton.

Kunin is from that pioneering generation of feminists who fought so women could "have it all." Slaughter is from the next generation of feminists who are saying, "Thanks, but no thanks" to what she considers a myth. She recently left her "dream job" as director of policy planning at the State Department under Hillary Clinton for a more family-friendly lifestyle teaching at Princeton University.

But bosses named Clinton aren't the only thing the two women have in common. Both agree that for women -- and men -- to be able to be productive employees and competent parents, something's got to give. Structures need to change: We need paid parenting and other family leave, affordable day care and preschool, flexible work schedules and seismic shifts in the way our culture values work traditionally done by women. To put it bluntly: If we really care about family values and believe that children are our future, we need to start acting like it.



Kunin is calling for feminists to join with others in what she sees as the

unfinished business of the women's movement of the 1960s and '70s. "It is time for another social revolution, not for the benefit of women alone, but for the most traditional of reasons: for the sake of the family," Kunin writes.

Her book is full of well-footnoted data and persuasive arguments about why such changes would not only be good for women, for families and for our country, but actually for business as well.

Slaughter agrees about the need for government and workplace changes, but her article ends up focusing more on the need for women to make their own choices to pursue what makes them and their families the happiest.

It's what we all do (those of us highly educated, middle- to upper-class women who even have these choices). We try to find the most flexible job, the best day care or preschool for the money, and friends who will understand when we disappear during the toddler years. We choose careers that we hope will offer personal satisfaction plus plenty of parenting leave, and spouses who will be willing to share the child care and household duties.

But even if we get ours, should caring for our families be such an individual project? Kunin thinks not, and Catholic social teaching about the common good concurs. Even from a purely selfish perspective, it's in society's best interest for children to get a good start in life so they can become productive members of society.

Our Catholic faith teaches us that the ultimate goal in life is not "having it all" -- as worthy as the desire to maintain some balance between work, family and the rest of life is. I believe Kunin is calling for something even more countercultural, for all to have. Everyone -- not just women -- must be willing to accept responsibility and be willing to sacrifice so all children and families can have a fighting chance. I can't think of anything more pro-life than that.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the mother of two and teaches communication at Aurora University outside Chicago. She is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt.*]

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