

**Anna Atkinson**

---

# **Under the Circumstances *Single Motherhood in an Academic Culture of Doubt***

In order to understand what another person is saying, you must assume it is true and try to imagine what it might be true of. (qtd. in Elbow, 1986: 254).

In a moment of profound self-doubt, I recently asked a senior colleague for some reassurance that the progress I was making with my academic career was adequate. The response I received, though given in the spirit of support and encouragement, had the opposite of its intended effect. “Under the circumstances,” she said, “you’re doing really well.” But the qualification “under the circumstances,” particularly in an academic culture that esteems critique and doubt, devalues this “compliment” (if indeed it is one) to the point that it indicates condescension rather than praise. The need for that qualifier turns something that begins by sounding like a recognition of special conditions into the only nice thing one could say, under the circumstances.

And the circumstances? I married into the academy. I had just undergone a hysterectomy while in the midst of my MA year, and I suppose I thought, since I couldn’t reproduce, that I should consider myself lucky that *any* man would consider marrying me, let alone another graduate student nearing the completion of his PhD. In hindsight it seems an odd thing to believe, or think, or feel, for a person who has been described (“and I mean this in the nicest possible way, Anna”) as a “knee-jerk feminist.” Nevertheless, married I was. And upon hearing that the Children’s Aid Society “never” had infants available for adoption, I suggested to my then-spouse that we take the course for prospective adoptive parents, since there was no chance a child would be placed with us. The theory was that this would stand us in good stead later on when we went through the private adoption system.

Less than 48 hours after we completed the final home visit, our case worker called: “We have an infant in care now—when would you like to meet her?”

My husband left three days before the adoption was finalized.

I was only just getting used to being a parent when my marriage ended. I struggled with the idea of being a single mom and an academic. I doubted, at first, that I could manage. I considered giving up without completing my degree, since at the time I was only one chapter into my dissertation. I doubted I could finish. But I wanted my daughter to believe that anything is possible—and so I also had to believe. It was only a shadow of a belief, but it was better than the shadow of doubt. In the three years since, I have grown into my role as the sole custodial parent of a high-needs preschool child with Sensory Integration Dysfunction. I have begun the seemingly endless cycle of sessional teaching. But I have also finished and defended my dissertation (tripling my student loan debt-load in the process). When I crossed the stage at convocation, my daughter walked with me. It was her victory too.

Sessional teaching is exhilarating. The opportunity to engage students in a freeplay of ideas, to draw out their strengths and open their minds to new ways of looking at the world, is a challenge that inspires me daily. But sessional teaching is also debilitating. The need to create courses, write lectures, mark assignments and set examinations while being paid—on average—less than \$8,000 (Cdn) per course, is such time-intensive work that it can (and often does) stop research in its tracks. Since research leads to publications, and publications lead to permanent employment, there is a constant tension between the need to work as a sessional in order to survive, and the need to stop working in order to research and publish so that you can land a tenure-track position which actually pays you to do the research that, as a sessional, you have to steal time away from teaching to do. This situation is further complicated by the fact that if you do not perform adequately in the classroom, the institution that hired you is under no obligation to do so again the following year.

But nearly everyone goes through this process. Thus, although the work is hard and not necessarily financially rewarding, the playing field on which we all compete for permanent positions is pretty much level. Or at least it is for most of us. Those of us who have obligations outside of work, particularly obligations that are as draining as parenting, appear to be at a disadvantage. The perception is that we lack both time and energy when it comes to the kind of CV-building that would position us favorably in an increasingly closed job market; and to a certain extent this is true. Add to this, as in my own case, the challenge of handling all parental responsibilities alone, while juggling straightened financial circumstances and the demands of a high-needs child, and under the circumstances, remembering to look both ways before crossing the street suddenly seems like a major achievement.

Which leads me back to where I started this essay, back to the topic of doubt. I doubted I could compete with other new Ph.D.s hungry for jobs, since the competitive playing field seemed to me to be so uneven. I lack(ed) the time,

the energy, the freedom of movement and of schedule that other academics (even sessionals) have. The fact that my daughter is now in Junior Kindergarten but cannot, because of her sensory challenges, cope with an after-school program, means that on Monday, Wednesday, and alternate Fridays, my day ends when her school dismisses at 2:30pm. And the fact that my housing and food costs are higher—not to mention the cost of daycare for the days when she is not in school—means that even book money is scarce, and travel is out of the question. All of which leads to less time and fewer resources for research purposes.

And yet, to suggest that I am “under” the circumstances is to suggest that I am somehow both pressed down by them and expending energy trying to fend them off. In fact, though, it would probably be far more accurate to talk about the circumstances being under me. My daughter, my work, my complicated schedule rushing between two universities and assorted other jobs, these circumstances are what “hold me up” in many senses of the phrase. They slow me down, certainly. But they also support me while providing an anchor; they are my inspiration and my motivation. In the end, as my own mother keeps reminding me, our circumstances do not affect us nearly as powerfully as our responses to these circumstances do.

And in fact these challenges are minor when compared to the effect of the academic culture of doubt. This is a culture that simultaneously insists on and ignores all these “circumstances,” and in so doing creates a veritable minefield that makes lifting a ton of feathers look almost like a reasonable task. Because while those who know your circumstances dispense the kind of qualified praise that turns itself inside out, those who do *not* know the circumstances judge your performance with the same yardstick they use on your peers who are childless or who have a partner to shoulder some of the load. And to introduce the circumstances to these judges would be unprofessional, for the very valuable reason that you are being hired as a professional, and external circumstances have nothing (theoretically) to do with your performance on the job.

But in part the tendency to be close-mouthed about “the circumstances” is also due to the doubt in people’s minds concerning how well you can function as a professional if you *are* a single parent with a high-needs child; that is, if you *are* “under the circumstances.” Doubt is such a salient feature in the way our minds operate as critical thinkers that we tend to be unable to express things in terms of belief. To introduce the circumstances under which my life operates would be to introduce more reason to doubt whether my performance will be adequate in the future—or at least so it would seem. And the counterpoint to this is that people seem to find it impossible to believe that accomplishments achieved “under the circumstances” have the same validity as those that are achieved without such circumstances, as though concessions or the need for special pleading were involved in the awarding of the achievement. But the fact is that if you take away the circumstances, the accomplishments are still there. Believe me. And yet, belief is hard to come by. And it is the culture of doubt—

my own self-doubt included—that I continually find myself fighting my way out from under.

It was in reading Peter Elbow's *Embracing Contraries* that I began to understand the impact of doubt as the predominant methodological construct upon which the academy is based. Elbow traces the dominance of this mode of thought in large part to Descartes, who "sought what *cannot* be doubted and therefore remains certain" (Elbow, 1986: 256). This has led to a culture, particularly in the academy, which believes "certainty is possible if we are willing systematically to doubt everything" (257). This is certainly a trend that is traceable through Hume and Arnold, and skepticism is hardly new to the modern era. But what it has led to, in Elbow's words, is our inheritance of the assumption that "the ability to criticize a claim we disagree with counts as more serious intellectual work than to enter into it and temporarily assent" (258).

Indeed, so deeply inscribed is our culture with this methodology of doubt that there is an equally deeply rooted fear of belief. To commit to a belief is to risk being wrong, to open to the possibility of being labeled weak, a possibility Elbow relates to gendered perceptions of belief and doubt:

With respect to gender, doubting invites behaviours which our culture associates with masculinity: refusing, saying No, pushing away, competing, being aggressive. Believing invites behaviors associated with femininity: accepting, saying Yes, being compliant, listening, absorbing, and swallowing.... A man tends to be seen as less masculine if his style is that of the believing game—if, that is, he operates by pliancy, absorbency, noninitiation, and nonaggression. A woman tends to be seen as less feminine if she shines in the doubting game and loves to win arguments and find errors in the other person's thinking. Trying to believe someone we disagree with tends to make us feel vulnerable, and our culture has seen it as the woman's role to be vulnerable (or at least to acknowledge vulnerability) (Elbow, 1986: 266).

I wonder if it is possible that motherhood, and particularly single motherhood, encourages one to be perceived as hyperfeminine (or even simply undeniably feminine) and thus incapable of participating effectively in the masculine "doubting game." The perception I *know* it creates from comments people make to me is that I cannot possibly have time to be an effective academic and scholar. This perception is not simply, I think, a result of my needing to juggle so many responsibilities at once. Elbow touches on a deeper and more fundamental issue related to the relative values accorded to belief and doubt in the academy:

Doubt implies disengagement from action or holding back, while belief implies action. When we doubt, we tend to pause; and by pausing ... we doubt better. When we believe fully, we tend to

act... Thus, the intellectual or academic person is traditionally seen as a critic disengaged from action. The engaged “do-er” is usually seen as less thoughtful—as though doing and thinking must be opposite. (1986: 265)

I cannot think of anything less conducive to pausing than trying to keep up with a four-year-old. But this does not automatically lead to a lack of thought. In fact, parenting—particularly, I would argue, parenting singly—is one situation wherein it is absolutely essential to combine thought and action—and maintain a balance between belief and doubt.

It was also in reading Peter Elbow’s *Embracing Contraries* that I rediscovered Augustine’s astonishing statement: “*Credo ut intelligam*,” I believe in order that I may understand (qtd. in Elbow, 1986: 262). If for a moment you can believe with me that a child—and single parenthood—constitute assets rather than liabilities for an academic in the throes of beginning a career, then perhaps you will understand how this may be so.

If I may make a rather outrageous parallel, single parenting is much like a closed head injury. My mother suffered one during a motor vehicle collision recently. In the ensuing months she found her thought processes had changed so that, for example, whereas she had always “just known” what day it was, she now had to visualize a calendar in order to work it out. She was somewhat concerned about this and mentioned it to her doctor, whose response was very interesting. He indicated that when high-functioning adults suffered the kind of injury she had, often the healing process was more correctly termed a compensation process. That is, the processes the brain had been using no longer functioned adequately and, while in children such injuries might heal, in adults they were less likely to—or at least took much longer. The result is that the brain finds other ways to perform these functions, and while they might seem unconventional, they certainly get the job done.

The same is true of life as an academic and a single parent. There are certainly very material and practical ways in which parenting has changed the way I function as an academic. The fact that I have no backup for my parenting means that if my daughter is ill, I have to stay home with her. I have learned to become web-literate and maintain a web-page for my students so that in the event of an emergency and a missed class, I can post lecture notes for them and assign discussion topics upon which they can report the next time we meet. I am also consistently at least two weeks ahead when writing lectures, because parenting emergencies happen, and time can quite suddenly become very scarce indeed. In fact, on the whole parenting has gifted me with an efficiency that I lacked in my salad days when I would work until midnight (and accomplish, in retrospect, very little except a feeling of self-righteousness).

Other changes in my *modus operandi* as an academic are less easily quantified but, for me, no less valuable. Although I remain a doubter, and although systematic and conscious critique remains part of both my writing and

my teaching, I have found the value of “the equally systematic, disciplined, and conscious attempt to *believe* everything no matter how unlikely or repellent it might seem—to find virtues and strengths [I] might otherwise miss” (Elbow, 1986: 258). As well as the construction and defense of arguments—which connects metaphorically to an almost militaristic attitude toward both teaching and research—there is strength and merit in the ability to “transmit an experience, enlarge a vision” (Elbow, 1986: 261), an ability Elbow associates with belief rather than doubt.

Most importantly, perhaps, the valuing of belief that has come with my experiences as a single parent has illustrated to me the importance of community. Again I will turn to Peter Elbow, as his thoughtful commentary on belief and doubt mirrors my thoughts so elegantly: “Doubting is the act of separating or differentiating and thus correlates with individualism.... Belief involves merging and participating in a community; indeed a community is created by—and creates—shared beliefs” (264). My ability to participate in and help to shape that community, through my research and writing, through my work in the classroom, and through parenting, fuels my passion for all the career paths I have chosen.

I realize that this essay must appear to border on some sort of nightmarish Pollyanna “glad game.” I don’t mean it to—or perhaps I do. I certainly do not advocate the purposeful creation of single parent families in the academy. But on the other hand, if in the academy we are embracing, striving to promote, and aspiring to represent diversity, then I would advocate strongly for belief in ability, and in the gift of adversity—any adversity—as a tool toward strength rather than an obstacle preventing advancement. I would suggest that having a child, and even raising a child alone, has in fact made me a better academic and a stronger critic—in part because it requires me to believe in ways that I never have before, and in part because it necessitates time management and a well-rounded life. It does not stop me from producing critical material; indeed, it spurs me on.

Ferdinand Magellan once said: “the church says the earth is flat, but I know that it is round, for I have seen the shadow on the moon, and I have more faith in a shadow than in the church.” On the strength of his belief in a shadow, he became the first to circumnavigate the globe. In the end, like Magellan, it is belief that allows me to do what I do. My daughter is the shadow on my moon, and equipped with that shadow of belief, I will continue, like Magellan, to do the (im)possible and sail around the world. And I’ll stop in every park, slide down every slide, and jump in every puddle I can find along the way.

## References

- Elbow, Peter. 1986. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Teaching and Learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.