



*Perspective/Opinion*

## Hope springs maternal: Finding strength as a physician single parent

By Lara India, MD

*“Divorce is never a good thing, but sometimes it's a better thing.” This was perhaps the best condolence that I had received since breaking the news to my family, friends, residency classmates. Of course, all the platitudes in the world amounted to nothing as I sat at my computer and drafted a letter of resignation to my program director.*

Despite my efforts to balance anesthesia training and caring for my then one-year-old son, my soon-to-be ex-husband's lawyer argued that my job made me an absent parent and he threatened my custody. Never mind that my lawyer assured me that this line of reasoning was unsound: overwhelmed by desperation – to put my child to bed in our home as many nights as possible, to regain some modicum of control over my life, to live in a world where a physician mother is celebrated for the opportunities she provides her child rather than demonized – I sat, late at night, in the dark, drafting an email in Microsoft Word. With the recent move and spate of unshared bills, internet service was a luxury I couldn't afford.

The sleep deprivation of early parenthood can fry your nerves. As can the sleep deprivation of residency. Throw in the chaos that led my son and me to become a family of two, and something had to give. The nature of divorce meant that I would already be missing out on far more of my son's life than I ever imagined. No one becomes a parent expecting only to be present for some fraction of the time. So, in those moments, alone in the dark, nothing mattered more than ensuring I could be with him as much as possible. Four years of medical school became irrelevant. Residency graduation, a mere three months away – unimportant. If my career could be weaponized against me, then I would remove it from the equation.

How I wrote a letter that sounded so professional despite how badly I wanted to scream and shout and smash things, I will never know.

Admittedly, the demands of medical training did keep me from being fully available to my son. My ex worked from home. He never got stuck late. Even the pediatrician's concerns about my son's speech delay took a backseat to my unpredictable schedule. I had been forced to cancel his speech therapy evaluation twice when I unexpectedly could not make the appointment.

Closing my laptop, I hastily scribbled a reminder to reschedule that appointment – again – and noted the time. After midnight. Hopefully he'd sleep the rest of the night before we'd both be out the door before 6am for daycare drop-off.

He was, mercifully, a good sleeper. And even on the nights that he wasn't, I was oftentimes awake anyway, my fried nerves unable to be calmed. Sometimes, I even welcomed the distraction from my racing thoughts and, as a few more days went by, from the unsent letter saved on my desktop.

We reached the weekend – Easter weekend. When I was a child, my mother hid elaborate Easter baskets, filled with small trinkets, chocolate, and jellybeans. My sister and I would anxiously wait for the whole household to rise, ready to begin our search. By the end, we consumed far too much candy and left a trail of shredded plastic “grass” around the house. In my overwhelmed state, I had put no such effort into my son's Easter.

My parents hosted us, along with my siblings, their spouses, and children. I didn't anticipate the sting but felt it more poignantly as each family arrived, whole and intact, compared to my new, smaller family. Before brunch, let alone Easter baskets, appeared, I was ready to leave. My son, however, blissfully unknowing, grew unexpectedly tired and fell asleep on my parents' bed.

That was my moment. Suddenly, free from active parenting with more than enough responsible (no, not just responsible: trusted) adults present, I left. To get some air, just for a few minutes, I said in response to the pleas that the food was almost ready. Eat without me, no problem, I just need a minute.

Windows down, radio off, breathing focused, I drove through my childhood neighborhood. Street corners I knew well, well before I was a parent. “Divorce is never a good thing, but sometimes it's a better thing.” A better thing: taking steps to right myself after the fiery crash-and-burn of my marriage, knowing that my stability would translate, eventually, into stability for my son. Facing single parenthood, with all its stereotypes, steadfast in knowing, even in the moments of judgment and uncertainty, that my decisions were made to create the best life for both of us. How odd to navigate such foreign concepts through such familiar roads.

I ended up, of all places, at a dollar store. Although I hadn't devised any grand celebrations, at least I could create a last-minute Easter basket. With a woven green basket filled with iridescent plastic grass, some multi-colored eggs, and two Sesame Street bath toys, I headed back to my parents' house.

My son still slept; brunch was still under way when I returned. Morning turned into afternoon as the kids reveled in their Easter gifts and the early spring weather. I lingered longer than my siblings. Despite having sought solitude earlier in the day, the return to my empty apartment after these festivities would leave me sad and I knew it. Before departing, I placed my son's modest basket on a low shelf and encouraged him to look for the Easter Bunny's surprises. Once found, he giggled with delight at Elmo and Cookie Monster. Then, clutching each in a hand, he buried his face in the side of my leg while wrapping me in the biggest hug his small arms could manage. When he pulled back, he spoke in his unique toddler language, the one that can only be understood by a parent. He said thank you.

I never sent the resignation letter, though not because life became significantly easier. Single parenthood is rarely easy. It is a logistical jigsaw puzzle of work, school, childcare, and extracurriculars. The busyness is compounded by the daily set of major and minor parenting decisions, oftentimes made without another person to act as a sounding board. The responsibility and worry are heavy. My status as a physician lessened my burden, certainly financially, but also, I suspect I suffered less judgment and avoided more “single mom” stereotypes because of my education. Once I gained confidence to share my story, I found a supportive community of women, physicians and otherwise, who came to single

parenthood through death, divorce, or by choice, yet suffered the same challenges. Yes, each of these women's circumstances were unique, but these same themes ran throughout.

My son is nearly six years old now. He almost never stops talking.

*Dr. Lara India is an assistant professor in the Departments of Anesthesiology and Internal Medicine, Geriatric and Palliative Medicine Division. She serves as the Director of Medical Student Education for Anesthesiology and as an Early Clinical Learning Director for the MCWfusion curriculum. Outside of the hospital, she can often be found wandering Lake Park, ideally with her two boys and a spicy chai latte.*