



## THE GRASS ALWAYS SEEMS GREENER ON THE OTHER SIDE

By Susan Vogt

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My husband, Jim, and I have experienced just about every combination of work/home employment imaginable – both employed, both unemployed, Jim employed and me at home then vice versa, and various combinations of part-time work. By far the most years, however, (about 15) have been spent "job sharing." This means we both hold the same full time job (Co-Directors of Family Ministry) and split family and office responsibilities down the middle. Jim worked in the office Mondays, Wednesdays, and half of Fridays and I did the opposite. Although this meant a more modest income than if both of us worked full time, we preferred it because it allowed one of us to be home with our four children during the day. I don't mention this because I think that this is what everyone should do (certainly many careers and financial situations would not allow this flexibility) but rather, it has put us in a unique situation to pass on some learnings that may be helpful to couples facing work/family tensions.

The primary insight that I have had from our experience of job sharing is a variation on the adage: "*The grass is always greener on the other side*". On the days that I was home with the children, especially when they were toddlers and I carried the constant aroma of spit up milk on my clothes, wore a uniform of jeans and T-shirt, and considered it a successful day if I could manage to get the dishwasher unloaded before Jim returned at the end of the day, I sometimes found myself admiring "professional women". They got to get dressed up and do "important things" like go to meetings and talk about goals and decisions and intellectual stuff with other adults. They seemed to have prestige and class. If the dishwasher needed emptying they would delegate it, or better yet, they would go out for meals. On the days when I was feeling like slave labor (and the kids contributed to that by doing things like "being a kid") I certainly felt that the grass was greener on the other side.

On the alternating days, however, when I *was* that "professional woman," there were times when I would envy the homemaker. Perhaps it was one of those glorious spring days when, if I were home, I could have just decided to put off the chores and take a stroll with the kids to discover milkweed and blow dandelion fluff. I would remember fondly the freedom to arrange my own schedule, be available to go on school field trips, and even catch a nap myself if the baby's bodily rhythms permitted. I was my own boss, sort of. As a career woman in an office, I was more insulated from the weather - good and bad - and not as free to take advantage of sales, special events, and home projects like refinishing furniture. Errands, haircuts, shopping, etc. had to be squeezed in on the way home from work. Of course I didn't have the guilt that many parents who have a child in day care experience, since my husband was home with the children when I wasn't. In addition, I truly enjoyed the sense of fulfillment in using my talents and having them appreciated by others.

I have come to realize that this last phrase **appreciated by others** is probably an important distinguishing element separating homemakers from parents employed outside the home. Both **WORK**, and intellectually I certainly realized that the raising of young children was extremely important and creative work, but children don't do much for the ego. The older they get, the more critical they seem to get (with short lapses on Mother's Day and other sporadic occasions).

Appreciation and status are two of the advantages of many jobs. Homemakers have to learn to cope with this and find ways to compensate. (I've sometimes thought it would be helpful to record a message like, "Good job, Mom! You're a neat person. Thanks for your help." and play it over and over on bad days.)

In the end what this has taught me is that the grass only **appears** greener on the other side. (I know, the rest of you probably learned this in kindergarten.) Happiness and fulfillment are an inside job.

Although I have been writing about the family/work issue, I see the same dynamic play itself out in many facets of life. When counseling, I hear spouses, tired of their own mate, mistakenly think that changing to a new person will make them happier. The excitement only lasts a short time before that new person's faults are discovered and they too become boring or annoying. Or there's the parental complaint that their children do not resemble the well-behaved, or creative, or intelligent children of their peers or of their own youth. One's child may not be the most athletic, but maybe she is very caring. A son may not be scholarship material but maybe he's a diligent and reliable worker.

The moral of the story? Make your grass green, whichever side you're on.