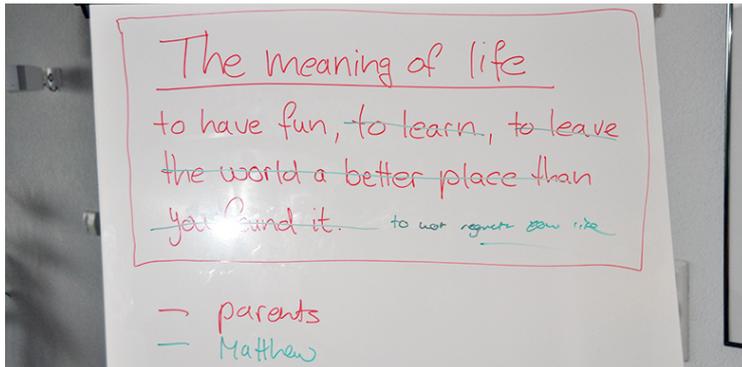


## A plea for dual careers

23.04.2014 | [In person](#)

Author: [Ursula Keller](#)

**For Columnist Ursula Keller, a dual career means neither partner has to give up their dream. Paternity policies and dual career hiring protocol would promote equal opportunity.**



An essential lesson of life: “Have fun and have no regrets.” (Photo: Ursula Keller)

In my last column I outlined the potential differences in the experiences of female and male professors likely to persist as long as there are so few women in STEM fields. With this column, I would again like to relate my own experiences to broaden the discussion on dual career opportunities as they have affected my own life and career.

I grew up in the middle of Switzerland in a traditional family. My mother became a full-time housewife in her early twenties and had three children in the space of five years. Born in 1959, my childhood during the late 60’s and 70’s was influenced by the feminist movement (Remember that Swiss women only received the right to vote in national elections in 1971!). Even though my parents had a happy marriage and my mom was a good mother and wife, I knew that I wanted to be financially independent and not have to rely on support from my future husband. Of course, I had no master plan for what I really wanted to do. Luckily I excelled in school, which, gave me time to grow up and eventually led me to ETH Zurich.

I had no female role models in Switzerland that I could relate to and no clear answer to comments that I would come to my senses once the biological clock start to tick. Sometimes I would say that “I do not want to get married or have children” just to end unwelcome conversations about my future.

Fortunately, I had a chance to experience a less limiting environment when I moved to Stanford for my Ph.D. after finishing my ETH diploma in 1984. Although this was against the advice of my professors and I still had no master plan for my future, I figured that, at the very least, I would improve my English.

Stanford for me was simply amazing and inspiring. Suddenly I had many female role models. One of them was a visiting professor, Geraldine Kenney-Wallace, under whom I took some directed studies during my first year in Stanford. She gave me a lot of positive feedback and encouragement, and she helped me to find the “right” professor for my Ph.D. research. I am still very grateful for her support; she really made a difference for me. I then met my future husband who was a Ph.D. student in the same group. When he asked me to marry him at

the end of my Ph.D. studies, it was clear that we would both continue with our full-time working careers.

My husband and I have been married for more than 25 years, and I can say that we truly followed our original vision of equal opportunity. When we had our two boys, I went back to work 10 weeks after each birth and we cared for our children equally. Apart from nursing, fathers and mothers can be equally competent in caring for infants. Together we learned the logistics of raising children, enjoying the different stages from baby to toddler, and currently the teenager phase of our kids. Every phase has had its own beauty and challenge.

A few years ago, as my husband explained the meaning of life to our older son, I realized once again why I fell in love with him. His definition was: "To have fun, to learn and to leave the world a better place than you found it." Our son has kept the fun part and replaced the rest with "to not regret your life". Essentially, this is it!

Dual career for me means that neither partner has to give up his or her personal dreams and both can use their capabilities to do something special, get a job, earn a salary and recognition ... and finally not to regret their lives.

Relating my personal experience to the bigger picture, it is important to recognize that changes in society and institutions can either promote or hinder dual career opportunities. My husband and I were able to work out our own personal solution. But the important establishment of paternity leave policies (e.g., in Sweden) has allowed fathers to increase their involvement in child rearing. There are also key steps that universities can take, including (but not limited to) developing a dual career hiring protocol.



#### About the Author

Ursula Keller was born 1959 in Zug. She has been a physics professor at ETH since 1993, and director of the NCCR MUST since 2010. She obtained her Masters at ETH Zurich in 1984, and her Ph.D. at Stanford University in 1989, and before returning to ETH she worked as an independent researcher at AT&T Bell Laboratories. Her current research group explores ultrafast science and laser technology, using this competitive know-how to understand and control fundamental charge and energy transport with atomic spatial and attosecond temporal resolution. Ursula has received several international prizes, as well as a European Research Council (ERC) Advanced Grant. She currently serves as the president of the ETH Women Professors Forum ([ETH WPF](#)).