



*In this issue, we introduce Eleanor Vincent, who joins Jennifer King as a writer of the essays in Page Break. Eleanor is a health education communications manager for Kaiser Permanente in Oakland, CA. Her passion is ensuring that health information is written in plain language, addressing the health literacy needs of patients, and assisting clinicians in communicating clearly. In addition, she has published articles, essays, poetry, and a memoir, *Swimming with Maya: A Mother's Story* (Capital Books, 2004). She has won numerous awards for her work, including a Woman of Promise Award from the Feminist Writer's Guild. The AMWA Journal welcomes her to Page Break.*

## Ants, Altruism, and Surviving a Wedding

By Eleanor Vincent, MFA

Seen from above, I imagine that our interconnected gray cubicles look something like an ant farm. I sit at my desk with a stack of tip sheets and brochures to edit. I hear the buzz of my fellow ants: their low phone conversations, the tap, tap, tap of their computer keys. We toil in an office on the 13th floor of a high-rise building in downtown Oakland, working for the largest combined medical group and health plan in the United States. The physicians and staff of Kaiser Permanente provide care for more than 3 million Northern Californians. Here in Health Education, we create and shape materials—on the Web, in print, via Podcasts or CDs—that help people live healthier lives. Like ants, we lay down a trail of information for others to follow.

Actual ants practice “kin altruism.” Most worker ants are sisters who are more closely related to each other than to the offspring they will never have. Wikipedia says that sterile workers toil to support the breeding and survival of their mother, the queen. They care cooperatively for her offspring. Altruistic indeed! Perhaps comparing workers in a vast health care bureaucracy to ants isn't quite parallel—we aren't sacrificing our reproductive independence in order to preserve a colony. But we *are* altruistic.

What inspired these musings anyway? It began the day my 26-year-old daughter Meghan announced her engagement. The words, “mother of the bride,” evoke a *mélange* of emotions: pride, terror, and resounding awe. How can my child possibly be so grown up? How can I possibly be so *old*? To manage my anxiety, I immediately sought advice from other MOBs, colleagues who have walked this road before me. As it happens, a health educator 3 cubicles down from mine hosted a wedding for her daughter less than 2 years ago. My boss, Caren, married off her daughter and son in the same 2-year period. Suddenly, I didn't feel so alone.

With her trademark humor and *élan*, Caren shared information about the best bridal stores. She coached me on the fine points of paying (and tipping) vendors. When I was wringing my hands over how best to welcome out-of-town guests to San Francisco, Harriet, my health educator colleague and friend, immediately volunteered that she had put together goody bags for her guests and offered to help me do the same. Balancing the stress as well as the joy of my daughter's wedding by sharing it with my coworkers helps me to be more present in my daily work.

When my daughter e-mails me a new horror story about the outrageous prices of wedding cupcakes (\$4 apiece!), or complains that the hotel computer system is crashing and losing reservations, or frets that customers of the alterations firm she had planned to use say the seamstress wrecked their dresses, I restrain my panic. Instead, I head straight to Harriet's cubicle or Caren's office for a consultation and a good laugh. I always come away with a new resource or insight and with renewed determination to forge on. Without the sister ants who toil by my side, finding the path forward would be incalculably more difficult. Our particular brand of altruism—friendships based on hard-won life and work experience—makes achieving work-life balance a much happier and easier enterprise. With support and practical suggestions from Caren and Harriet and a host of other friends, planning my daughter's wedding has become a shared enterprise.

