

"**T**RIBUTE TO MOTHER(HOOD)... ASPECTS." These words, with a deadline, are stuck to the wall of my study on a one-inch by two-inch bit of paper. Tonight they attract my mind like a magnet, so instead of grading papers or going to bed, I succumb to their lure.

Write a tribute to motherhood? For me at this point in my life, that request feels like asking someone in a mid-twentieth-century Soviet prison camp to write a tribute to communism. Let me explain.

Tonight I got home from work (and a stop at the pre-school) at 6:05 p.m. I began frying pork chops and peeling potatoes, thinking, "Well, dinner on the table by 7:15 (after allowing time to kill all trichinosis bacteria) – not too bad." Anyway I had to cook the chops because I had defrosted them a week earlier but each night had not had enough time to cook them before the kids filled up on toast and snacks. These meditations were interrupted by loud cries from Marie, the four-year-old; Roz (nine years old) was afflicting her with hairspray and a comb in an attempt to restyle her hair.

Ellen, the middle child, was gone for twenty minutes and, just when I began to worry about what she was doing, appeared with a report that the upstairs bathroom toilet was full to the edge and stopped up. Asking enough to questions to determine that it had not overflowed, I continued peeling potatoes. But Marie went to investigate. She peed in the toilet and flushed it, rushing down a minute later with the news that it was overflowing. I ran up and grabbed towels to mop up the two-inch-deep brown water all over the floor; meanwhile, the kids raced upstairs with news that the water was dripping through the ceiling onto the living

room rug. They love an emergency. As I crawled around reaching under the bathroom counter, Marie announced, "Mommy, I have red bumps all over my arms and legs and tummy, and they itch."

The next hour and a half went to plungers, burning pork chops, phone calls about volunteer work for the school play, a quick look at the medical book's description of measles, and a battle between Marie and the other two over whether to turn off the TV as the white horse was being sucked into quicksand in the movie *The Everlasting Story*. ("It's too scary", sobbed Marie.) Somehow by 8:05 I had the TV off and all three kids sitting at the kitchen table. As usual, Ellen ate the spinach and nothing else, Marie only the pork chops; Roz consumed maybe half the food, never removing her eyes from the book balanced over her plate.

At about this point Dad made his grand entrance and I retreated to the bathroom to clean the floor, towels, and bathtub preparatory to getting all three kids through the bath/bed routine. (Actually, it's not routine; every night there is a new crisis invented by one or more of them to avoid going to sleep.)

But the evenings are easy compared to the mornings: getting them out the door and to three different schools (two of which begin at 8:20 a.m.) with all the right library books, permission slips, lunch boxes, show-and-tell items, etc. When I think about the mornings, I see gates most of all, gates mercifully closing. I also see socks and shoes.

Somehow all the tangled crisis of the morning ends as a gate slams shut. I remember all the gates, the first when Roz had just turned two and was entering pre-school. I stepped over the red-painted half

door and looked back at my healthy darling sitting on the floor in a circle of toddlers with snot hanging out their noses. Though I felt that I was abandoning her to a terrible fate, a college classroom beckoned, and I had to be there without a toddler. Soon Roz had the first of her bi-monthly preschool nose-and-chest infections. She began to live on antibiotics, but she survived.

Now it is the 7-foot blue-painted metal gate of the preschool clanging shut, as well as the colorfully decorated doors of a first-grade and fourth-grade classroom quietly closing. The gate closes, and suddenly my space expands. I breathe deeply, feeling relief and remembering that I haven't eaten breakfast yet. I realize that I still have papers to grade, and that I will be late to class if the freeways are jammed. My mind's attention turns to me and my work, where it will stay all day until I begin the afternoon round of picking the kids up, perhaps ferrying them to lessons or soccer (or Brownies -- is it Thursday?).

But before the gate slams at least one child (sometimes all three) reports that she has no socks to wear to school. The ones laid out the night before are too thick, too thin, the wrong color, have a hole; the ideal sock has no match. One or both parents becomes entangled in the Great Sock Hunt through mounds of laundry as the clock reports, "8:15", "8:16", and school buzzers go off in front of neat lines of children who have already found their socks.

The sock hunt really has nothing to do with socks. A child has a devouring hunger for attention and direct eye contact with a parent, preferably on a lap. The need for love is insatiable. Toni Morrison described this hunger in *Beloved* when Sethe responds to Paul's suggestion that

they have a baby: "... she was frightened by the thought of having a baby once more. Needing to be good enough, alert enough, strong enough, *that* caring -- again. Having to stay alive just that much longer. O Lord, she thought, deliver me. Unless care-free, motherlove was a killer." (p. 132) The children of parents who work outside the home know that morning and evening are the only two times when their needs for eye contact and attention can be met. Whether the clock says "8:19" is not important.

If the sock hunt fails to occupy more than ten minutes, they move on to shoes. "My shoes are too little," one child claims, proving it with righteous indignation. (How could she have changed a full size in three months?) As far as mornings are concerned, this crisis is easy, solved by the promise of a trip to the shoe store. But when the evening or weekend comes, the other two kids want new shoes too. It becomes impossible to sneak in the front door with just one pair of shoes. The other two kids demand equal treatment, even if their shoes fit fine. Shoes become the sign of how much a child is loved; there can never be enough shoes, socks, toys, love.

Motherhood, like communism, is a great and beautiful idea. There are times when it works, when things go right. I remember Marie's warm cuddly body next to mine in bed at night, most nights. I remember when Roz in third grade had to write a paragraph about her hero, and she chose her mother. Then there was the dramatic moment when Ellen gave a toy from the McDonald's Happy Meal to her cousin.

Yes, motherhood is beautiful, but it is so overwhelming. It means giving 100% twenty-four hours a day, unless one retreats to the world of paid employment for some of those

hours. When I do that, I find myself trying to give 200% during the remaining few hours. Why did I get into this enterprise anyway? My therapist says that I had a "repetition compulsion" -- a desire to repeat the tasks undertaken by my mother, trying to do better than she did. Counselors also say I should meet my own needs, get rest, and not try to be Supermom.

But children, like dogs, have a lot of persistence. When they want love

and attention, they get it, even if it means hitting someone or using socks as an excuse. It's hard to focus on my needs when theirs are so insistent, so the focus shifts to them and stays there -- until the gates slam shut. ♦

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Editorial

When this issue began taking shape around mother-daughter experiences (from the sublime to the fatigued), I didn't know that I, too, ultimately would be compelled to contribute -- nor that it would be with such regret. But a week-and-a-half ago my mother died.

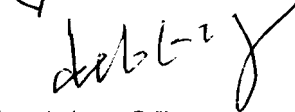
I was in the San Francisco area for a holiday visit home. She was in the hospital, having a difficult time recovering from heart bypass surgery a month before. In so many ways, her death was too soon. But by Christmas, she and we reluctantly had begun to prepare ourselves for the departure.

I was her only daughter and enjoyed some the specialness of that relationship. As a shy little girl, I marvelled how she made her way as a "modern" Chinese American woman until she was happily ensconced in mainstream America. As an emergent adult, I chose different paths, wandering farther than she liked, but never out of range of her chronic care. And as I stepped into motherhood, I grew to accept her as a sister human being, and to respect her capacity for survival and contagious ebullience. In spite of our geographic distance, we managed to be there for each other at the best and worst of times.

I was there for her dying, and I'm glad. Not for her death, but to have held her hand. To have sat with her at the completion of her days. To have captured a portion of her strength with which I now must tend to the living.

So, to the presses with this *UPDATE*. My gratitude to all the mothers' daughters, and daughters' mothers, who have contributed to this issue. I dedicate it to my mom:

♥ JUNE MARGARET WILKINS: JULY 5, 1930 - DECEMBER 26, 1991.



Deborah Jang, Editor