

Mothers, Not Martyrs

Each year at this time, florists and greeting card companies count on Mother's Day sales to boost their earnings. Greeting cards wax poetic about mothers and their virtues. So who are these goddesses worthy of exaltation? Most of the mothers I know are just regular folks, doing the best they can to care for their families.

Mothers (and Oprah Winfrey) can tell you that raising children is perhaps both the hardest and the most important job any person ever does. Even those without children can appreciate the monumental commitment. All around us we see the results of parenting efforts, lax and conscientious. It's clear that raising children without thoughtful effort can lead to disaster. And yet, the task is "twenty-four-seven" with never a day off.

You're still a mother when you have the flu and the toilet is backed up. There are simply no excused absences from the responsibilities of child rearing.

One young mother put it to me this way: With most jobs in life, you can do it half-way and get away with it. Only being a parent requires that you do your best and then some every single day.

Being a mother requires that you smile and say good morning to the baby who had you up all night. That you hide the tears when your preschooler breaks your Waterford vase trying to bring you breakfast in bed. That you are lovingly concerned leaving an important business meeting when the school nurse calls to report your child's vomiting in the auditorium.

Why do mothers make these sacrifices day in and day out for their (often oblivious) families?

I'll tell you why they do it. They do it because the love they feel for their children is coded into their DNA. They think of their children's needs first, not because they're martyrs, but because when you love a child so fiercely, his happiness matters more to you than anything. When children skin their knees, their mothers' hearts bleed.

When mothers reach deep inside themselves for patience or forgiveness or energy to meet the day's demands, they often experience powerful personal motivation. They have a vision of what they know their children can become and they are willing to do everything they can to empower them to achieve that vision.

After years of helping her child grow, every mother knows that she will work herself out of a job. She gives up the embrace of soft little arms in exchange for pride in seeing the fine human being that child grew up to be.

Mothers are ordinary people with extraordinary hope. They grow frustrated, feel ambivalent, and make mistakes. But when they see the future, they see us in our fullest potential, and they know awesome joy.

