

**Marie Porter**

---

## **A Mother, Two Sons, Then Another**

I am the mother of three sons. Simple statement, but behind this simple statement is the story of half my life. It is a long and involved tale of a life lived on the edge of unknowing. It too frequently descends into the darkness that exists where life meets death, where we stand waiting to meet the victor of these basic forces. Sounds a dramatic outcome from deciding to become a mother? I assure you it is not as dramatic as the reality. What follows is but a synopsis.

My precious first born, David John, arrived in 1963. It was he who gave me my mother identity, who caused the most extreme of feelings to wash over me, who had to cope while I learnt to mother. I loved this baby so much, (I remember crying just looking at his perfect little toes) but so much of the motherhood package roused intense negative feelings in me. I found being constantly responsible for another human being—one who couldn't even tell me if he was too cold, too hungry, overfed, sick or in pain—extremely wearing. I seemed to spend my time in a state of anxiety, of constantly questioning if I was “doing it right.” Besides I was a person who liked organization and had been a teacher whose days were routinized. I found it nigh on impossible to adjust to this baby with his unpredictable needs and wants. It did not help that David was highly allergic, sick regularly, and not a good feeder. Nor did it help that he was an advanced child who couldn't wait to achieve his milestones. The mother road, full of twists and bumps was both unfamiliar to me and being covered at breakneck speed with my baby son in the driver's seat. I do not know what I would have done without my mother and father and my mother-in-law. All three supported me.

My precious second son, Bernard Thomas, arrived after I'd coped with two miscarriages. David was now a mature three-and-a-half year old. Bernard was a long thin baby who had a hearty appetite and good health. If he was well fed,



*Happy Christmas, 25/12/1989*

he was content. No doubt much of the reason he was content was that I now *was* a mother. His elder brother had paved the way, making life easier for him. I had discarded my training wheels. Although Bernard was also a forward baby, he was different from David. He had an ability to make us all laugh. He did not seem to challenge me as David had done. However, I learned that on the occasions when he did he, he was not open to reason or distraction as David had been, but determinedly held onto his position while I had to think of a way to solve our confrontation and save both our faces. They were very different individuals. What worked for one certainly was no guarantee it would work for the other.

My husband and I decided to have a third child who was due to be born when David was six and Bernard was two-and-a-half. By now, I suppose if



*Anthony and I, September 1985.*

someone had asked me, I would have said I was an experienced mother. No doubt that was true. Sara Ruddick (1989) argues that maternal work consists of preserving, growing, and training the young in social responsibility. My two sons were well on this road.

Six weeks before my third baby was due, I wrote to my close friend telling her of my fears for my baby. This feeling was new to me. Such fears had never entered my head during my other pregnancies. I had been worried about carrying Bernard because of the miscarriages, but I had no concerns about his “normality.” My friend, the mother of five, replied in her usual practical way that if there was something wrong with the baby I was carrying, worrying about it for six weeks wouldn’t help.

My precious third son, Anthony Gerard, arrived after a short easy labour. This was heaven in comparison to the previous traumatic labours and births. Anthony, at eight pounds, was larger than his eldest brother, and smaller than Bernard. He was a beautiful baby. It puzzled me at the time, and still puzzles me, why, with this easy birth, I spent the next twenty-four hours crying. I had not descended into sadness after the others were born. Do we sometimes “know” the future on some inexplicable level? At this stage there was no inkling of the problems ahead. Anthony wouldn’t suck, but then neither had David in the first couple of days.

I soon learned my beautiful third son was a nightmare to feed. He couldn’t suck enough to keep the nipple in his mouth. Finally, after ten days of persevering, I had injections to dry my milk. I was very upset about this as I had breast fed my other sons. Bottle feeding wasn’t a breeze either. I had to support Anthony’s chin and put gentle pressure on his cheeks to enable him to suck. I kept insisting something must be wrong with this supposedly big healthy baby. The doctors could find nothing.

By six weeks, Anthony was back in hospital with the first of what was to become almost constant chest infections. It was still a nightmare to feed him, as he coughed and sputtered and kept losing the grip on the teat. He tired easily. He “rattled” when he breathed. I needed all my professional and organizational skills and every bit of experience I had gained in my mothering of my other sons just to get through a day. My husband was running our busy business and I had

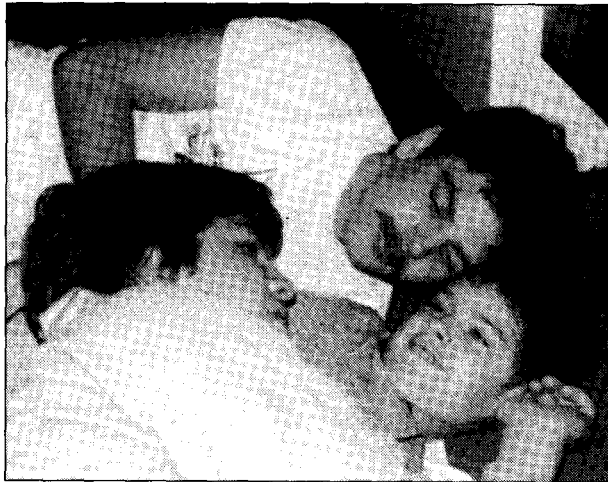
Bernard at home all day. He seemed to mature over night and was a great help to me, young though he was.

Because of my insistence that something must be wrong with my baby, while Anthony was in hospital on this first visit, he was thoroughly checked by both the family doctors and a specialist. The verdict? He was intellectually way ahead, but physically lagging. However, he was sick and I was used to forward babies. No problem. He'll be fine.

I tried to believe this. Anthony was certainly a beautiful baby with his dark brown eyes and eyebrows, long lush eyelashes and platinum hair. He was also a happy charismatic baby who loved people and drew them to himself, an ability he has honed over the years. However, he still "rattled" and feeding him was getting worse rather than better. Because he tired so easily, I was often feeding till late in the night to get an acceptable amount of formula into him.

When Anthony was four months old, I took my three sons to visit the friend I'd confided in before Anthony was born. Deep down I think I was seeking the opinion of an experienced mother who, I knew, would be truthful with me, but who was not a family member constantly interacting with this baby. Anthony still had all his old problems and none of his muscles seemed to be working. He could not even hit a toy or hold his head at all. He also now was waking frequently at night covered in sweat and obviously in severe pain. This scenario was repeated during the day. (It was repeated for nine years until we discovered a urologist who was both interested and knowledgeable. The pain was due to urine retention and Anthony was in danger of severe kidney damage. Under this doctor's expert and exploratory care, Anthony was soon only waking about three times a night. We thought we were in heaven. He is still under the same urologist and his kidneys are still fine.)

Both my friend and her doctor agreed there was a problem and soon we



*Anthony and his two brothers, July 1984.*

were in the State Capital city with a team of medical experts investigating and testing Anthony in every possible way. Nobody could find anything wrong with him. This was a repeating story even though it became more and more obvious as Anthony grew older without physically improving that something was desperately wrong. Four



*Off to Padua for the first time, 4/6/1981.*

months later, when he still hadn't improved physically, we were told he would not survive until his first birthday. He didn't have enough muscle tone to support life and would either choke or die of pneumonia. His one hope was that the doctors didn't know how he had survived so long with so little muscle tone. He must be very determined with a strong life force, they thought. We have 30 years of evidence that that is true.

My husband was devastated at this news. For me what was being verbalized was what I already knew only too well from eight long months of reviving Anthony when he choked, listening to his chest rattle, and sitting with him in

hospital while he struggled to live. The words were a relief in a way. Anthony's reality, my reality, the reality we lived with in our family, was being acknowledged at last. My main concern apart from keeping Anthony alive, was how to prepare my two older sons. They adored their little brother. I knew before I could prepare them I had to be able to cope myself.

I drew on the wisdom of another mother, a mother whose story I had read years before, whose name I could not remember, but whose wisdom had stayed with me. She also had had a child with a slim grip on life. She had told her children that their baby was not very strong and would not be in the family for long. All the family could do was enjoy him and make his stay as happy as possible. (And earlier this year Bernard said with a laugh, "And twenty-nine years later ...?") My sons seemed to accept that story without too much fuss although every crisis worried them as it did us.

That was my approach with my boys. My self approach was that I decided that when Anthony died it would not be because I was incompetent. I would preserve, grow, and train this child as I did my older two. I'd just have to learn more, be more efficient, and I must create a pattern to do this because the patterns of life on offer for disabled people that I saw in Australia in the 1970s were not good enough for my darling son with his many gifts.

I never wanted to be a doctor or a nurse, but I learned to cope with heart failure, choking, and massive spasm attacks that could be fatal if not responded

to promptly and properly. I learned to do urinary catheters, chest percussion, mouth and throat suction, and so on it went, while all the time coping with choking and chest infections. We all learned to rejoice in the many small victories and recover from the many crises quickly. Anthony was a great help as his wonderful optimistic nature and his determination to live was always there for us to draw on. For Anthony once he had survived a crisis, we'd best get on with life quickly before the next one hit. Most importantly, I loved my precious son and still do. That is not to say I do not equally love his brothers, but they have different needs especially now.

David is now 36. He has given me a great daughter-in-law, Bernardine, whom I love dearly. Together they have presented our family with three darling boys—Anthony's precious nephews. David has a successful business and is a good husband and father. Bernard, a successful barrister, 32 and has a partner whom we gladly welcomed into our family. Anthony is 30. He has been near death countless times. His disabilities became worse as he got older. He lost his ability to swallow, to make sound, the very limited function he had in his right index finger. He can no longer say or do anything, but he can communicate well with his vital brown eyes and also with his yes/no. He is fed through a tube. He was told a year ago that his lungs would be lucky to support life for another six months, but my smiling, determined son is still with us, enjoying his circumscribed life. He listens patiently to, and sympathizes with, other people's problems despite the vastness of his own. He is the only person I know who can throw a party with five days notice and have 85 people come.

I am a mother of two sons, then another. Sara Ruddick put into words for me my own approach to mothering. I have preserved, grown, and trained my three sons into socially adept adults. As I cared for David, I became a mother. As I cared for Bernard, I honed my skills. As I cared for Anthony, I ventured into a land of challenge, drama, and exhaustion beyond comprehension. Mothering was suffocatingly intense and complicated. I adapted what I had learned in mothering David and Bernard as best I could. As I look back now, I see that land as a war zone rather than a mother zone (Jackson, 1992). There were many casualties, we all carry scars, but out of the chaos new life emerged. We all have understanding, depths, and skills that have developed from the challenges we faced. I have been well supported by other mothers—family, friends, and acquaintances. As a result, I know so many strong, talented mothers. I have great respect for mothers. It is my dream to have society similarly recognize and respect the value of mothers and their motherwork.

## References

- Ruddick, Sara. *Maternal Thinking*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.  
Jackson, Marni. *The Mother Zone: Love, Sex Laundry in the Modern Family*. Toronto: Macfarlane Walter and Ross, 1992.