A Personal Reflection on Mothers and Sons

“Come to the edge,” he said.
They said, “We are afraid.”
“Come to the edge,” he said.
They came.
He pushed them
And they flew.
—Apollinaire

In the beginning
Mothers are assigned the difficult and heavy responsibility of rearing sons and daughters perfectly and we are held accountable for any acting-out that our children express even into their mature adulthood. But even before that, we believe that it is our duty, our obligation, to bear the children in the first place. Then, the onus is always on us, the enablers, to get it right the first time. We delve into self-help books on how to raise daughters and sons, according to the ideology of the day. We even consult our mothers and grandmothers in weak moments. And we absorb the arguments put forth about permissive versus authoritarian child rearing practices, read books written by child psychologists and pediatricians as well as new mothers who want to share their recently discovered wisdom about mothers and sons, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, fathers and daughters. We cite these experts and learn to rely on their words of wisdom and we learn to ignore our own innate sense about what is good for our children. We ignore the wisdom of women sitting around the kitchen table dispensing the wisdom of the ages. We neglect to establish our own comfort levels and parent as legitimately and appropriately as we can. And we forget to inculcate the accumulated knowledge contained in stories told to
us by our friends, relatives, and colleagues so that we can create a bank of experiences from which we can all learn. When we do speak to the “experts,” it is not in a sharing mode but as supplicants reaping the wisdom of the ages about the grand themes in life, not the nitty-gritty details that comprise our daily lives and which can drive us to unreasonable action.

And in the hive of busy-ness that envelops us, we forget that our ultimate goal, our ultimate challenge, is to push these babes who are no longer in swaddling to the edge and over and watch them fly. We need not forever be enslaved to the ideals of motherhood.

After you are privileged to watch them soar to the heavens on the wings of their dreams, you can begin to reassemble the bits and pieces of your psyche and attempt to reclaim your identity as a person in your own right. Slogging through the various stages of child rearing, beginning with that first magical moment when you see that beautiful baby, through the terrible twos, the toilet mouthed fours, to the day when you reread your journal and discover that you wanted to walk away from it all changes your persona. I do not believe that you can reconstruct yourself as you once were, but in many respects my past has been my prologue and I fall back all too easily into the nurturing, hectoring, advising motherhood stance I adapted during my twenties and thirties. The experience of motherhood leaves one changed beyond words and, at the same time, responding to adult sons and daughters as if they were twelve. It can be difficult letting go, watching them fly and knowing that you can no longer reach out, catch them and bring them back to your bosom, to a simpler era, when they were babes in swaddling drinking deeply their share of mother’s milk.

Narratives of experience mothering sons

The poem, “Milestones in the Life of a Mother or on the Subject of Sons and Toilet Paper,” was inspired by a coffee break conversation with a group of desperate working mothers. And it was related to giving up the good fight because it was all just too overwhelming. That particular day we spoke about personal hygiene and its absence as expressed by our sons deeply rooted aversions to water, soap, towels and toilet paper. Toilet paper? Yes, toilet paper!

*Milestones in the Life of a Mother*  
*Or*  
*On the Subject of Sons and Toilet Paper*

There are three washrooms  
In the house  
Count them  
three  
And toilet paper in only one  
The one that is  
Located
In my bedroom
Opposite the walk-in closet.

Does no one use
Toilet paper?
Do you pray that
You will have
The good luck
To find a crumbled
Tissue or two
In one of your pockets
After you have used the facilities?
Or do you use the toilet
The one
In the master bedroom
Opposite the walk-in closet
Which always has toilet paper.

There comes a time in the life of every mother when you remember the
daily struggles to lead your son to the shower and a bar of soap and find yourself
almost wishing them back again when sons discover pubescent charmers and
the joys of daily showers. Your son now showers for hours or until the hot water
tank is empty and his skin all wrinkled and prune-like in appearance. The
telephone is always engaged and if you concede to requests for a second
telephone line, you will find that your enterprising son will use your line for
outgoing calls and his for incoming ones. My daughter once answered the
telephone only to have a female voice demand accusingly: “who are you?” She
answered, “I’m his sister. Did you think he was a man of independent means,
living alone?”

The widespread introduction of personal computers and email does not
really solve the telephone problem. Using email, should you have a computer
and an email account, ties up the phone line as well unless, of course, you have
a second line. Please refer to the incoming/outgoing call comments above. The
situation can only become more trying when son insists that he is doing research
for a school project on the Internet, not on a chat line. He is not that
irresponsible! How can you deny him computer time when all he is trying to do
is complete an assignment due tomorrow. After all, you do want him to succeed
at his studies, don’t you?

About Sons and Girls

You know your son has discovered girls
When he takes showers unbidden
And uses at least a half bottle of cologne
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Or after-shave lotion
Reeking of budding manhood

You know your son has discovered girls
When he changes his name to
A uni-syllabic grunt
Symbolizing teen-age angst and machismo

You know your son has discovered girls
When he dashes to answer the telephone
With the bound and flourish
Of an Olympic runner
Striving to reach the finishing line tape
At the end of the 100 metre race.

Testosterone Surges

This is the story of the fight
Between two brothers
The story of the fight
And the broken hand

Two brothers circling each other
As boxers do
Searching for the chink
In the armour
That sliver of space
Between the upraised circle of arms
To reach out
And punch the other
In the head

One reached out with a long hard jab
The other did not duck quickly enough
The jabber did not make a proper fist
He broke his thumb!
The jabbee danced away
Laughing
Dancing away
From the glancing blow
To his head

Horrified
I asked
“how could you do this to your brother?”
He, of the bad fist, replied
“very easily”
The doctor taping the splint
To the broken thumb
Disdainful of my horror
Pronounced
“It is easy to see that you had no brothers.”

Decision-making
Reflecting on my oft-stated mantra that my role as a mother was to teach my children to live independent lives, leave home relatively guilt free, and, as the bible states, leave parents behind and cleave unto a partner so closely that it is as if you were one flesh reveals something less than honesty on my part. At the time I believed that bravely stating that my goal as a mother was to teach my sons and daughters to become independent adults who would make their own decisions in their lives would actually ensure a smooth transition from childhood to independent, mature, appropriately-behaved adulthood. My entire being, my raison d’être became my children. I had swallowed the myth of natural mothering and the enabling woman.

With the impetus to be the perfect mother, I pushed away from my mother and constructed myself as this paragon of virtue, industry, and love—the perfect mother. And I began the process of teaching my children to make choices, responsible decisions; I made a promise to myself that I would not control their every action. I would let go, when that magic release time arrived.

I remember beginning the teaching of decision-making by affording them a choice. “Will it be orange juice or will it be apple juice? Will it be in the blue plastic or the yellow cup?” That really was not an exercise in decision-making, but rather clever manipulation on my part.

“If you can get up in the morning without me waking you up to go to school, you can stay up as late as you want. If I have to wake you up, I set the bedtime hour, but you can read in bed for a half hour before lights out.” Well, we all know the outcome of that little exercise in parental control. Yet I held on to the illusion that I was teaching them responsibility, how to be independent, and how to make appropriate decisions.

Eventually something happened that pushed my theorizing to the edge and over. It was my friend’s older sister who finally pushed me to the edge of that perimeter so that I might witness the first solo flight of my two oldest sons into the skies of adulthood. It was also my induction into trust, trusting my children to tell the truth about their experiences, believing them and recognizing the legitimacy of their claims to justice.

Both boys had been sent to their first ever sleepover camp and it had not been a good experience. The older one asked that I take him home on visiting day because he was not feeling well. I knew that if I took the older one home,
I would have to take the younger as well. So I doubted both of them.

"How old do they have to be before they can tell you the truth?" their sister asked of me. "How old do they have to be before you will believe them?"

With these words ringing in my ears plus her exhortation that I not be like our parents, I was prepared to take my sons home on visiting day. My first glance at my son's swollen face and body, disfigured by both poison oak and poison ivy, with superimposed huge welts delivered by mosquito bites on the network of rash covering his body left me limp and weeping. The camp nurse confirmed that no doctor had been called in to treat him. I took them home!

My Three Sons
And
My Two Daughters

My three sons
And my two daughters
Became a team
But as they grew
Older
Their dreams
Their aspirations
Their goals
Changed
And
Each developed
According to a
Master Plan
Certainly not
My Master Plan
But
According to their own
Master Plan

Yet I remember
With fondness
Their earliest dreams
Of becoming
Mommies and daddies
And especially the
Dream
Of one
Independent
Non-conformist
Sister
Who wanted to
Grow up
To be a
Dinosaur!

About grandsons
Only children have no one to blame for things that go wrong about the house, unless, of course, they have a pet dog or cat. Children with siblings are especially advantaged when it comes to denying responsibility or even knowledge of a misdemeanor. My son telephoned me to inform me that his son had learned two wonderful new words, words that would help in deflecting anger, blame and avoid responsibility for his own behaviour. That telephone call was the inspiration for the poem “About my Youngest Grandson.”

About my Youngest Grandson
My youngest grandson
Blessed with
Three older sisters
Has learned the
Two most important words
In the English language
Words that will
Stand him in good stead
Words that
He can lean on to sustain him
For many years to come.
What are these magical two words?
Not me!

Who put the empty ice cream container back in the freezer?
Not me!
Who emptied the last drop of milk from the last container?
Not me!
Who filled up an entire sink with glasses
Soiled and stained by mere tap water?
Not me!
Who filled the sink with dirty dishes?
Not me!
Who is going to put them in the dishwasher?
Not me!

About grandmothers
Now that I am pursuing a doctorate in education, I am asked why, at this
stage in my life, I decided to challenge myself in this way. "What will you do with it?" "How will it enhance your life?" My answer could be phrased rudely or I could draw upon the words in The Ethics of Our Fathers and paraphrase Hillel. "Why not me, and if not now, when." I submit the following in answer to the paraphrased Hillel and in answer to another question, "What are you going to be when you grow up?"

Reflections on Being a Grandmother

Now that I am a grandmother
And working toward
Becoming a crone
I count ten grandchildren
Soon to be eleven
Who call me
Grandmother.

Now that I am a grandmother
And working toward
Becoming a crone
I know that I
Shall wear red
And I shall wear purple
And I shall
Grow old
Outrageously
Graciously

As the poet said,
"I grow old.
I grow old.
I shall wear my trousers rolled."

Now that I am a grandmother
And working toward
Becoming a crone
I shall
Study forever
Write forever
And learn from books
And learn even more
From living and experiencing
This life
My life
And the lives
Of other women
Around me
And I shall
Enjoy
My grandsons three
Sons of the oldest daughter
And my grandson
Who is the
Youngest son
Of my middle son
And
Listen to them
Rail against their
Collective six sisters.
Doomed to be
Outmanoevred
manipulated
How much sympathy
Can I extend to them?
For my heart lies
With their sisters
Final Reflections

Reflecting upon what was, I can only state that I honestly tried to raise sons and daughters to maturity as free thinking adults who would not be tainted by the gender binary. My template was not modeled after that old nursery rhyme that teaches us that little boys are made of “snips and snails and puppy dog tails” while little girls made of “sugar and spice and everything nice.” My girls never wore pink frilly dresses and my sons were placed in the same pink bunting bag for the first weeks of their lives that their sisters used. Throughout my early childhood, my grandmother raised me in a fatherless home while my mother worked as a sportswear operator on Spadina Avenue in Toronto in the heart of what was then the “shmatta” trade. I understood that women worked, relied on their own good efforts and was taught by my grandmother not to await the knight in shining armor to arrive at the front door.

Nevertheless, that gender binary insinuated itself into my very being through the vessels of popular culture and I, too, at times, wanted sturdy, manly sons who were sometimes heroic. I accepted the responsibility for child rearing as a given in motherhood, although I also understood, or rather intuited, that patriarchy’s reach was all-pervasive and made it my imperative to demonstrate that women do matter. As a result, not only do my sons cook, sew, wash clothes and clean house, they are supportive of their wives’ careers and understand the pressures that are brought to bear on a woman’s self/selves through the
multiplicity of roles thrust upon her. One of my daughter-in-laws who is 
abloom with child speaks about the blessing of my son’s calm nature. (This is 
the one who broke his thumb making a bad fist.) Their pregnancy has been 
eased by his calm demeanor.

And finally I come to the end of this reflection on Mothers and Sons and 
Mothers and Daughters, unable to pass on words of wisdom about my 
experiences raising five children. I can only share my narratives of experience 
with you and I can share my understanding of what I perceived, what I thought 
was the truth. But, all truth is fiction.

Finally...

This is the end.
There isn’t anymore
I have to say
About sons
But to say
That
They grow up
And move
Out of the house
And come back
To the house
And move
Out of the house
And
Come back
To visit
With their girlfriends
Who become
Their co-vivants
Who become
Their wives
And eventually
They bring
Their children.
And there isn’t anything
More that
Can be said.

Reprise

As a woman who married “up,” I bear the label “privileged.” Yet the ethnic 
diversity from whence I came has influenced my life’s choices and I have always 
worked in an enabling profession. I stayed the course of femaleness through
early marriage in the silent fifties, child bearing and rearing in the sixties, feeling that I had missed something. My sons, the beneficiaries of my privileged status, have positions in the “sexy” areas of computers and information management. Each has two degrees and one is working on a third one. Whatever influence I have had on them is now part of their own persona and I can do no more.

Having babies is no longer a consequence of marriage and I am no longer capable of having babies. I no longer need bear the responsibility for other men’s choices or desires. I love my sons and daughters deeply, but am offended by some of their decisions. I am still learning to let go, still learning that, as Adrienne Rich maintains in Of Woman Born, altruistic maternity is a cultural construct and not a biological imperative. Now that I am swimming in the stream of glorious cronehood, I wish to be free of the responsibilities of motherhood; I wish to throw off the shackles of conventional wisdom that has informed me these many years that being a mother is a life choice forever and ever.

Ultimately the most liberating
Piece of information a woman
Could have is that her infant can
Attach to anyone.

—Erik Hesse, 1996