

**Marion Gold**

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## **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 envelopes 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

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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

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 jabber danced away  
Laughing  
Dancing away  
From the glancing blow  
To his head

Horrified  
I asked

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“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

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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



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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

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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 to 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