

Mothers' Day: It's Not Just for Mothers Any More

Two children ordered their mother to stay in bed one Mother's Day morning. As she lay there looking forward to breakfast in bed, the smell of bacon floated up from the kitchen. But after waiting and salivating over her anticipated breakfast, she got up and finally went downstairs to investigate. She found her children both sitting at the table eating bacon and eggs. "As a surprise for Mother's Day," one explained, "We decided to cook our own breakfast."

I well remember those Mothers' Days when my brother and I decided to cook breakfast, carry it in to Mother on a breakfast tray, perhaps spilling the coffee and orange juice, and receiving the well-rehearsed "Oh, for me? Thank you, darlings." And of course, we were completely oblivious to the fact that Mother would later have to clean up the god-awful mess we had made in the kitchen. But our hearts were full of good intentions, never mind the execution.

If you're like me, pushing senility, you remember when Mothers' Day was a time when Dad gave Mom flowers and candy, and the family of Dad, Mom, and 3.2 children went out to breakfast, or maybe brunch (You certainly would not take the 3.2 children to a - (gasp) - fancy RESTAURANT) to celebrate her day. After breakfast, there might be church or maybe a big fuss about giving Mom the "Day Off," before settling into the routine of everyday life: Dad would be watching the game, the kids would be playing outside in the burgeoning spring weather, and Mom might find a little time to catch a cat nap before rising to make dinner, wash the family's clothes, iron Dad's shirts for the next work week, and maybe, just maybe, taking time to herself for reading *Good Housekeeping*, or *Redbook*, or *Ladies' Home Journal*. Ah, the good old days when men were men and women were...well...mothers.

And what about the work force in those days? Women who worked were an anomaly. Working women were considered to be either poor, single, undereducated, weak, non-

assertive, or a combination of the above. Women who worked (that is women who worked for a salary) had jobs that traditionally paid less, even though their work often demanded much more from them: teachers, nurses, typists, receptionists, bookkeepers - You know the drill. And what did every one of these women aspire to become - according to the men who controlled the earth? Wives and mothers. Indeed, women who reached this pinnacle of achievement, almost always gave up their low-paying day jobs for a 24-hour gig of unpaid housework, culminating in a once-a-year Sunday of celebration with the family at Perkins, Denny's, or I-Hop. How many of you have heard of the ubiquitous women who went to college to pursue an MRS. degree?

I'll bet the idyllic vision of graduating with an MRS. degree did not include the household drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and changing diapers.

But time has a way of changing things. World War II revealed the fact that Rosie the Riveter was a capable, reliable, and **hard** worker. And that realization of Rosie's capabilities partially gave rise to the emergence of a whole battery of capable, educated, and accomplished women who made up the post-war generation. Gloria Steinem founded a publishing empire and a movement. Shirley Chisholm, not only a woman, but a BLACK woman, launched a viable run for the presidency. Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Queen Elizabeth II, Betty Friedan, Ruth Bader Ginsberg, Margaret Thatcher, Hillary Rodham Clinton, Nancy Pelosi, Maya Angelou, Kamala Harris, and a whole lot of others, in our own lifetime, wrote an indelible history of accomplishments, not only of women, but each of them also happened to be MOTHERS. Yes, time has changed, and it definitely has been for the better. Who knew women could be multi-taskers?

Fast forward to 1972 when my wife, Diane, and I decided to marry. We were both well into our teaching careers. We both taught high school English, both were recognized by our peers and, most importantly, by our students as being accomplished, caring teachers. We not only taught a most demanding subject, requiring extensive planning

and grading which took up many of our non-school hours. We taught, we coached, we directed plays, we served on committees as members and often chairpersons, we wrote grants, we developed curricula, most of the time outside of the school day; and of course, outside of our contractual compensation: translation - without pay. Most of our workdays were spent arriving at school in the dark and going home from school also in the dark. We even developed a one-of-a-kind extra-curricular Advanced Credit course studying the plays which were to be performed at Ontario's Stratford Shakespeare Festival. The elective course entailed meeting outside the school day and culminated in our chaperoning a trip to the Festival as part of the course. For most of twenty-five years, we were never compensated for this course and indeed insisted as a matter of conscience to pay our own way just as our students did.

Getting back to our decision to marry, when we told our parents that we intended to marry, we added that we had talked it over and decided not to have children. (My mother's response was: "But who will take care of **you** when you get old?" which I thought rather odd, mainly because I had never thought of that as the principal role and duty of a child. Indeed, my tongue-in-cheek response to her was: "And are you expecting **me** to take care of **you** when you're old?"). Our decision to forego having children was reached because we both realized that we already had children, about 250 each, every year, and barring some repeats, they were different children from year to year. Some were brilliant; some intellectually challenged; some well-behaved; some constantly in trouble; some excelled (as an example, we both taught the present CNN daytime anchor, Kate Bolduan); some failed (we won't name names); some went on to successful careers; some ended up homeless and living on the streets; some were straight; some were gay or trans. But all of them needed something that we could give. They needed understanding, nurturing, and (if you will) Mothering. The Latin term "In Loco Parentis" (meaning in place of a parent) was never more aptly applied.

Both of our mothers understood our decision to remain childless; we'll probably never know how our fathers ultimately felt. Fathers in those days, at least our fathers, were typically reticent about sharing their emotions.

But speaking for me, and after 50 years of marriage I think I know my wife fairly well to speak for her as well, we both never regretted our decision. We realized early on that we had all the rewards and the frustrations of parenthood without the breakfasts in bed, the yearly visits to I-Hop, and the myriad responsibilities and heartaches that come with actual parenthood.

Two diametrically opposed episodes that I will never forget from my early years of teaching reinforce my feelings about my chosen profession. The first one occurred early in my career while I was still single. It was during a normal day, and a student was being particularly uncooperative and refused to follow directions, culminating in an exchange with his calling me a mother..... You probably can guess what the continuation of the word was; and it was not Mother Superior, Mother Hubbard, Mother Dear, or even Mother May I? Needless to say, I reacted predictably, grabbing him by the collar and hauling him down to the principal, barging past his secretary, and barging through the closed door to his office. I interrupted a parent conference he was having, and blurted out, "This kid just called me a (and I'm sorry to say I repeated the whole four syllable epithet), and you'd better deal with him because if I do, it won't be pretty. The principal later came to my room between classes laughing and reassuring me that he had dealt with the situation and didn't think I'd have any more trouble with the student, at least for the rest of the week. I realized later that it was Friday. My principal had quite a sense of humor, thank God.

The second incident came some years later. I had given the class a handout on punctuation and was circulating the room providing help and hints to the completion of the problem sentences. A boy in the front of the room was so absorbed in the assignment that he raised his hand, sensing my approach, and while still absorbed in his work, said in a questioning tone, "Mom?" He was instantly embarrassed by what he had said, and some students around him laughed; but at that moment I was so overcome with emotion, that I think I teared up. He called me "Mom," and at that moment, I felt pride; indeed, I felt like what a Mother should feel like: helpful, nurturing, caring, and educating, in other words, "In loco parentis."

Diane, my wife, has had similar experiences. We both still cherish the relationships that we built with past students who communicate with us on Facebook or send us cards and emails. We've had some visits, celebrated memories, and even have attended weddings and celebrated births and mourned deaths of former students and their family members. In fact, you might say, they **are** taking care of us in our old age, just as my mother hoped.

And now twenty-two years after we retired, the world is still changing. Now mothers don't have to stay home and be homemakers. They don't have to choose between a career and a family. They don't have to attend college seeking an MRS. degree. They don't have to restrict themselves in their choice of careers. They don't have to bide their time between raising their children and caring for their aging parents. They also, and most emphatically, don't even have to be women. Anyone who assumes the role of caregiver, nurturer, mentor, healer; anyone who leads, guides, educates, soothes; anyone who is responsible for molding the future of the next generation; **Anyone**, regardless of gender or societal expectations can be a mother.

And so, on this Mothers' Day, let us celebrate all of the mothers who have cared for us. We are all somebody's children, and we owe it all to MOM.

May it be so.