

# 3 Perspectives

## Laura Long

What I experienced 26-years ago, the moment I held my first-born child, Katie, is, I know, practically universal – but that is why it is so unspeakably powerful. As I peered into the wide eyes of that little creature, a tsunami swept over me – a gripping love that would not let me go. During pregnancy, I had read every child development book I could get my hands on, but I still felt completely unprepared for the untold responsibility of motherhood. I could bumble through my own life, but now, with a child? At home in our apartment, as Katie slept in her bassinette, I fretted about what I possibly had to teach her. What did I know for certain? What was my philosophy of life, the universe and everything? I re-read old journals from high school and college essays; I delved into the moral questions of religion and philosophy, trying to formulate some set of principles that would guide my parenting.

Brain dead and sleep deprived, I put that search on hold, finally realizing that I had a few years before my baby would be asking me why the sky is blue or who is the man in the moon or if there really is a Santa Claus. Slowly, I began to learn to love the sweet daily moments of each day, and to revel in the joy of childhood.

By the time my second daughter, Beth, was born four years later, I was hooked on the miracle of early human development. Children learn so much so quickly and so naturally that it seems that all of human evolution plays out in the first three years of life. I loved watching – spellbound –their accomplishments – stepping off hearth for the first time, inventing a family

of make-believe friends, writing a ghost story. In the joy of being with my little children, I found a new vocation – I went to graduate school, and ever after I have worked for high quality programs and policies for young children and their families.

As they have grown up, my children have taught me never to let life pass us by while we are waiting to figure things out. In 26 years, I never have quite returned to that primer on life, the universe and everything that I felt so compelled to map out as a brand new mother, for the eternal and existential questions were not the ones I was asked to answer. I was too busy figuring out how to make a French braid, tie a passable Girl Scout knot, and sew a unicorn costume. Forget philosophy and theology, I needed to find a source for Petri dishes for a science project, plan a family camping vacation and make Christmas come.

Everyone said “Enjoy your children while they are young because they grow up so fast!” Up to my elbows in soggy diapers, I thought that was the biggest lie. But then, before I could dry my hands, when Beth went off to college, and I couldn’t believe how the years had gone. Alone in an empty house, save for the dog, panic set in as I began to question my own efficacy. My children were out there in the night on their own, and I surely had failed to prepare them with all they might need. I should have taken the time to teach them to hem a skirt, to use the sewing machine, to live on a budget, to balance their check books, to carry their keys in their hand in dark parking lots, to turn off the water when the toilet is overflowing, to check their oil, always to refrigerate chicken, feed a cold, starve a fever, buy low and sell high – the list went on and on! Suddenly a lame-brained solution dawned on me: “We’ll have a mother-daughter retreat and I’ll teach them all the things I forgot to get around to.”

Fortunately for all of us, my lunatic midnight ponderings tend to disappear in the saner full light of day. But distilled from the experience is a lesson I'm still trying to learn – we do not own or control our children's lives and there are limits to a mother's toolkit. For someone like me who could use a 12-step program for control freaks, this is a hard drill.

No matter how good a mother we might be, we are sometimes like the Great Wizard of Oz, who is really just a little person behind a curtain with the no magic solutions. Our children have to find their own way – which in the end is a truth they usually have to teach us over and over again through many years of growing up and growing with each other.

So – what's left for the very earnest mother to do? The very thing that we started with the moment each of us gazed at her newborn child – the thing that surely springs from the very heart of God – to hold them and to be held in that same gripping love that will not let us go.

## Yvette Hill

In the dawning hours of April 20, 1985, I was wakened by the mournful cry of sirens threading the still morning air. Not realizing that the bell was tolling for me, I turned over and fell back into sleep – the last time in 23 years I've been able to do so easily.

Those sirens signaled the passing of my only sister from this life. They were headed down Laguna Canyon Road to retrieve her from the wreckage of her car. I received the call from my mother a couple of hours later. Her grief was palpable, clutching me through the phone. And even though I was not yet a mother, I knew her terror, her fragility, the horrific pain of having a living, breathing piece of her heart fiercely wrenched away.

What I did not know until some weeks later was that my 3 day old daughter was enfolded in my womb at that very moment, a precious gift issuing straight from God that would eventually salve the raw wound of grief. As with many gifts, though, the greater my love for her became, the more I feared losing her. There seemed to be some debt I owed the universe for bequeathing me this wondrous life at almost the very moment another mother – my own – had one snatched away.

Thus began years of low-grade anxiety; a dull, background beat of worry that never entirely receded. Each unanswered phone call, late arrival, or forgotten check-in spelled doom – it seemed every happenstance in life was that bell tolling again, this time ringing quite distinctly for me. I spent hours and hours wheedling ridiculous bargains with God to keep my only child safe. I promised to trade any number of years of my own life to add to hers. I thought that as long as I kept up a conversation with the Creator, I was holding Kali at bay.

These conversations, pleadings with a Spiritual Being I had not publicly acknowledged since 7<sup>th</sup> grade, were really the only form of prayer I engaged in for over two decades. It became the line that connected me to a higher realm, a deeper kind of consciousness. And though I was never granted a substantive answer or a firm guarantee that heartache would not befall

me, I did find comfort in prayer. It brought me to a place of stillness, and acceptance, just a step beyond worry.

Rhiannon, my precious daughter, is now 23, perfectly poised in age between my sister and me that fateful April day. I have been reflecting much upon that lately. That while every day many of us die too young, others are, perhaps unknowingly, nurturing the seed of new life. That for every mother welcoming a new life into her arms, another clutches her divided self in grief. The wheel of life is forever turning, bringing forth while carrying away, spiraling destruction and creation round and round in a never ending waltz.

The choice to become a mother is momentous. It is to decide forever to let your heart go walking around outside your body. Mother love makes a woman more vulnerable than any other creature on earth. Surprisingly, the majority of us learn to be okay with that. Somehow we learn to let go, both of those who remain with us, and those who go ahead.

Rhiannon's middle name is Lorraine, who was, is my baby sister and my mother's third child. Lorraine continues to hold a place within our family – we speak of her often; now my mother is much more likely to laugh than cry when she is recalled.

As for me, each day I listen less for the siren signaling my daughter's departure, and pray more in gratitude for our existence together in the here and now. There is not a day that goes by that I don't give thanks for her skin, her eyes, her hair, her lilting laugh, her shimmering radiance. For me, she will always be the embodiment of life's promise to eventually assuage our sorrow with a new chance at joy. And no matter which one of us is fated to leave first, I will always be a mother, her mother – that truth is an unending, unchanging gift from God that can never be rescinded..

## Susan Sim

Mother the noun and Mother the verb

My name is Susan Sim. Most of you know that I'm mom to Rowan Elliott, the little girl who comes screaming up here every Sunday and who Robinmarie calls "Boo."

Drawing on a distinction that Paul has been has been making over the last several weeks, I'd like to talk about "mother" the noun and "mother" the verb.

Mother the noun is like a job title. It's static. Once you give birth, adopt, foster, or marry into a child, you are given this label. It does not say anything about how, or even if, you fulfill any of the duties of the position.

Mother the verb is an action that needs to be performed over and over. It's a process that needs to be sustained on a daily basis. You do this by caring for and nurturing someone, by paying close attention to their emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual needs.

Some of us have a mother (the noun), who isn't very good at mothering (the verb). Maybe they were too young or immature when they had us. Perhaps they may were struggling with their own demons of mental illness or addiction. Or they were in need of a mother themselves. For people like us, Mother's Day can be awkward and bittersweet.

Some of us have people in our lives who are good at mothering, but aren't necessarily mothers (the noun). We may have had a relative, teacher, or neighbor who looked after us when we needed it. Men can mother too. The stay-at-home dad in my family is proof of that.

For me, I have always found mothering easy, but felt conflicted about becoming a mother (the noun). For a long time, I was ambivalent about having children. I had already been mothering for a long time and looking after people was a burden and a responsibility. Eventually, my biological clock forced a decision, and you all know how that turned out. I had a terrible pregnancy. My labor was 28 hours long. I developed post-partum depression. All this took a toll on my career. Needless to say, this did not help my ambivalence.

Despite this struggle, and perhaps because of it, I grew into the role of mom. There was no magic moment, no epiphany, just the daily grind of looking after and paying attention to Rowan, doing laundry, undergoing sleep deprivation, and changing diapers. But a change was happening inside me. I can't tell you when it happened, but I have two realizations that I can explain to you after the fact.

One realization was this: if the building were on fire, I no longer knew whom I would rescue first. Before Rowan was born, there would be no question that I would save Jeff, my husband. But now, there is a question and it's painful to answer. The reason was that my heart had grown.

The second realization was that finally becoming a mom allowed me to forgive my mother for all her failings as a mom. The experience gave me new insight into the role. I think us children tend to see a mother as a fully formed grown up who appeared on this Earth solely to be at the center of our universe. Becoming a mom to Rowan allowed me to see how young, hopeful, and anxious my mother was, and I understood why she made herself (and us) so miserable while trying to live up to expectations.

Mother's Day recognizes both people who mother (the verb) and mother (the noun). They can happen separately, and we are grateful to the people in our lives who are either one. But when they come together in one person, there's nothing else like it, not just for the children, but for the parents as well. To the mothers out there, on behalf of your children and me, I'd like to say thank you. The house might be untidy, you might not be a good cook, there might be lots of dirty laundry, you might yell and get mad sometimes, and money might be tight, but that's not what it's about. Thanks for the unconditional love, care, and concern. Thanks for being Mom and for doing mom.