

WITNESS: Motherhood – All Is Grace

Nicky Rowdon

Recently I accompanied my daughter to her first ever pregnancy scan. The nurse placed the ultrasound device on her abdomen, and immediately an image appeared onscreen. A tiny human child, with legs, arms, vertebrae, skull and face. And an even tinier heart, pulsing away in a body barely 5 cm long. But the thing that struck me most was the space around that body. A perfectly formed, dark space, sheltering this child in the midst of my daughter's own flesh.

Perhaps motherhood is, first and foremost, about space. There are no accidents in biology, and I think that this first fact, that a woman's body automatically makes space for a child, without her planning or choosing or necessarily wishing it, is the paradigm for the "work" which a mother will do. Because if a human being never has a protective space in which to develop, they will not develop well. We know that if we cause fear and mistrust in a child, they will carry that damage well into adult life. Probably until death.

This was my own experience. My mother was not able, because of her own childhood traumas, to give me the consistently nurturing space I needed. I began life with a skull deformed by a high forceps delivery. The rest of my life has felt like an extension of that clumsy entree: I loathe being pulled or pushed or manipulated in any way. I have trust issues. Sometimes my mother would rise above her own damage and we would have times of communion. Times when the umbilical link did not feel toxic. But any act of trust made by me in those moments was apt to be abused at a later date. Anything I said or did was taken down to be used as evidence against me.

I don't want to dwell on that except as the baseline against which I discovered my own ability to be a mother. Sometimes, those who know me well (and who include my own children) say, goodness, how did you manage not to perpetuate that damage? Where did you find the resources to be a mother yourself? And I genuinely puzzle over this. Until I realize that this is an epiphany. A showing forth of God. Because my resources are not human ones. All is grace, as St Thérèse (the epitome of a spiritual mother) would say.

I am not a perfect mother. But I have been consumed by the desire to give my children what I wish I had received myself. Friendly attention. A participation in the wonder of life. A listening and discreet ear. And above all: time and trust. Just as we need to make time for prayer if we are to know God, we need to make time for our children if they are to know him through us. This is the central, and principal work of a mother. To cooperate in the creative genius of the Creator. To behold our children and see (and say) that "it is good." This does not mean never criticizing them. But it does mean establishing a context of optimism and trust, rather than detraction and manipulation, so that any corrections can be made against that context, which respects the divine purpose of their development and thus motivates them to strive to do better.

As a consequence of my own childhood, there are things I am not good at. But to my amazement my children have been quite capable of learning those things from other sources. However, there are things I do know how to do, and those I have been able to bequeath to them. How to cook a simple meal without ruining the ingredients. How to take responsibility for your actions, to ask for forgiveness and thus be ever ready to give it. How to be a good friend. And as a consequence some of my children's friends have called on my motherhood too. It has never ceased to amaze me that I, who so longed for compassion from others, actually manage to find an eternal fount of the stuff within myself. Because I don't – I can't – rely on that self.

All of this makes me sound like something I am not. I am not one of those barefoot earth-mothers, oozing serene subservience. I have had to fight to keep doing work that strictly speaking is not part of my maternal vocation. Except that, in those rare forays where economic necessity has forced me to work outside of the home (and I am always working within it, whether on its physical infrastructure, or on the mental infrastructure of writing), I have found myself laughably, irresistibly, extending my maternal vocation. A young Muslim colleague once gravitated towards me, and began plying me with questions about love and marriage, faith and culture. Shocked by a news report about the stoning of a woman in Saudi Arabia, she asked me if Christians believed in stoning too. So I told her the story of Our Lord and the adulterous woman. When I got to the end, she gave me a huge smile. “That was *so clever of Jesus....*” I thought so too.

One of my favorite childhood fairy-tales was about a princess who left trails of flowers growing wherever she walked. I think mothers can be like that princess. Whether we are caring for our families or contributing to the wider community, we can follow a “way of beauty” all our own. We can give that extra quality of attention, that smile, that attempt at integrity and the nurturance of trust, without which society eventually breaks down.

I wonder about the two young men who are supposed to have placed the bombs that killed two women and a child at the Boston marathon. Did anyone ever sit with them and listen to their frustrations, their mental impasse? Did anyone demonstrate to them what com-*passion* really is? I know this sounds naïve (and strikingly, their actual mother expressed total disbelief about their involvement), but I can’t help wondering whether in the boxing-ring of life, sometimes the very space designed for the work of a mother gets crushed, to the point where the mother abdicates, somehow. Then love yields to hate, which yields to anger, which yields to... Death. Two young women not yet mothers, one from the West and one from the East. And an eight-year-old Catholic boy who had just made his first communion.

It makes you think. About the culture of death, so pointedly referred to by Cardinal O’Malley after the attack. About righteous anger, whether in grim presidential statements, or at the finger-tips of blogging berserkers. Our indignation is meaningless if we aren’t committed to protecting all vulnerable people, from conception to natural death. And right now, across the world, mothers are some of the most vulnerable people there are, because their work is not respected. It is not economically quantifiable. It is not speedily delivered. It is by definition invisible, unaccountable, like that tiny womb forming inside my once tiny girl, like the seed that germinates under the ground (to borrow a simile from Caryl Houselander) that must at all costs not be disturbed or dug up for information or a progress report.

It is not enough for the Church to say she values mothers. Everyone, from priests to people who know nothing about family life, have to step up to the plate and enable, rather than crush, the space needed by and created by the maternal vocation. For in the end, the only view worth having is the one that was, and is, created in a woman’s womb.

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