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Good Mothering

Tuesday's aol.com news headlines read

U.S. one of the worst countries for mothers....

Here's the lead: "According to the *State of the World's Mothers* 2015 report,¹ the U.S. ranks last [among] developed countries when it comes to mothers' health.... [Having slipped two spots since last year, the] U.S. comes in 33rd ... in the "Mothers' Index Rankings" – one of the lowest spots held by any other comparably developed nation....²

In author Shari L. Thurer's *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, she describes the experience of modern motherhood in North America:

"Had Tom Sawyer run away from home in the twentieth century instead of the nineteenth, Aunt Polly would have been taken to task. Back in the mid-1800s, it was generally agreed, by Tom's aunt and all the neighbors, that Tom was foolish to run away from such a good home; a century later, the neighbors would likely have felt that Aunt Polly's home was not good enough. Psychologists and professional social workers would have evaluated her 'mothering,' probably found it wanting, and might even have suggested another placement for Tom. After all, [the reasoning goes,] children do not run away from good mothers.

"The dominant belief after the Second World War was that 'there are not problem children, only problem parents.' Child rearing had become a perilous endeavor, a virtual set-up for parental blame. It is no wonder that, by the 1970s, ... when popular columnist Ann Landers asked her readers to write about their experience as parents, seventy percent of the voluminous

¹ *Save the Children*

² Please see m.aol.com, May 5, 2015, 8:19 a.m. Europe is the best country for mothers.

number who responded reported that their experience had been negative. Part of the problem was the new, onerous myth of motherhood.”³

The message is maddeningly self-contradicting:

Mothering is a blessing. Mothering is exhausting and thankless.
 Mothering is the most rewarding thing in the world. Mothering is torture.
 Good mothering is the most natural thing in the world.
 Good mothering is impossible.

As the poet Rilke wrote in his poem *Sunset*,⁴ sometimes it’s a stone in us, and sometimes it’s a star.

Slowly the west reaches for clothes of new colors
 which it passes to a row of ancient trees.
 You look, and soon these two worlds both leave you,
 one part climbs toward heaven, one sinks to earth,

leaving you, not really belonging to either,
 not so hopelessly dark as that house that is silent,
 not so unswervingly given to the eternal as that thing
 that turns to a star each night and climbs –

leaving you (it is impossible to untangle the threads)
 your own life, timid and standing high and growing,
 so that, sometimes blocked in, sometimes reaching out,
 one moment your life is a stone in you, and the next a star.

Euripides’ Greek myths of Medea and Agave got into the water, and it’s been all downhill for mothers since then. There’s a national obsession with bad mothering; we can all name the names of bad celebrity mothers. At the other end of the economic spectrum, society stands idly by in the face of bad mothering that is the product of bad government, a government that doesn’t provide food, shelter, health care, maternity and paternity leave, and child care as a basic human right. Common to all “bad mothering” is the experience of being thrown into the deep end with no clue how to swim or being handed the most complicated “some assembly required” package with no instruction manual.

³ Shari L. Thurer, *The Myths of Motherhood: How Culture Reinvents the Good Mother*, pp. 253-254

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Abend (Sunset)*, translated by Robert Bly

I'm talking about good mothering today, on Mother's Day; we'll get to good fathering on Father's Day. So, what is good mothering? What makes a good mother? Author Ayelet Waldman asked a few friends this question. Here are some of my favorite answers:

“[The good mother] lives only in the present and entirely for her kids. She has infinite patience.... is always cheerful and never yells, manages not to project her own neuroses and inadequacies onto her children.... Her children's needs come first.... They occupy all her thoughts, her day is constructed around them, and ... everything she does is for their sakes. Her own needs, ambitions, and desires are relevant only in relation to theirs.” And – my personal favorite – the good mother is “Mary Poppins, [only] ... related to you, and she doesn't leave at the end of the movie.

In other words, “Being a Good Mother, as defined by mothers themselves, is impossible.”⁵

Ayelet Waldman continues, “The Good Mother does not exist, and she has never existed, not even in those halcyon bygone days to which the arbiters of maternal conduct never tire of harking back. If the producers of *Leave It To Beaver* had really wanted to give us an accurate depiction of late-1950s and early-1960s motherhood, June would have had a lipstick-stained cigarette clamped between her teeth, [and] a gin and tonic in her hand....”⁶ Judith Warner, author of *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, writes, “This widespread, choking cocktail of guilt and anxiety and resentment and regret ... is poisoning motherhood.”

Do I need to say that this really needs to change? I do want to ask how we can work to change it, this culture of the impossibility of good mothering.

Author Anne Lamott is one of the people who's trying. Anne “Lamott is a single mother and [recovering] alcoholic with a pleasingly warped social circle and a remarkably tolerant religion to lean on.” Her book *Operating Instructions, A Journal of My Son's First Year*, has been called “the most honest, wildly enjoyable book written about motherhood.... [Rocking between hilarity and poignancy,] she responds to the changes, exhaustion, and love

⁵ Ayelet Waldman, *Bad Mother*, p. 10

⁶ Waldman, *op cit*, p. 10

[her baby] brings with [a mix of] aplomb [and] outright insanity.... [Operating Instructions is no] saccharine paeon to becoming a parent.... [It really captures] “the rage and befuddlement” of mothering.⁷

Anne Lamott writes, “...[We mothers] are all doing the best we can, and ... some days go better than others.... I see that children fill the existential hollowness that many people feel; that when we have children, we know they will need us, and maybe love us, but we don’t have a clue how hard it’s going to be.... [And it’s] a great experiment,” she says, “to wait and see what will come of it.... With ... people, the result is almost always a bit of a mess.”

Changing the culture of the impossibility of good mothering begins with telling these truths. In her anointed essay *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*, poet Adrienne Rich writes, “When someone tells me a piece of the truth which has been withheld from me, and which I needed in order to see my life more clearly, it may bring acute pain, but it can also flood me with a cold, sea-sharp wash of relief.”⁸

We can change the culture of the impossibility of good mothering by making room for mothers to tell their truths, and by insuring that they don’t feel they are in it alone.

A friend told me a story of a woman standing in line at a grocery store with a cart full of groceries and a toddler strapped into the little seat. As they advanced toward the checkout, the woman was speaking reassuringly. “It’s almost our turn, Sophia. Don’t worry. I know you’re tired, honey. Just a few more minutes, Sophia.” When they finally reached the cashier, he greeted the child. “Hi, Sophia! You made it!” To which the mother responded, “O, that’s not her name. I’m Sophia.”

Anne Lamott: “No one tells you that your life is effectively over when you have a child: that you’re never going to draw another complacent breath....” “You get to tell people the truth about this tiny person, how much you adore him, and how insane you feel, how in love and how depressed, and how much he scares you, how everything scares you now.... You will not want to tell most people how wasted and crazy you feel

⁷ amazon.com review

⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*, final section

sometimes, because you do not want them to think that you are a broken cuckoo clock of a parent. But you probably are. We all are; mad as ... hatters, to use the psychological term.... you have to talk about what's real, with safe people. Otherwise, you are going to feel so isolated and deficient that it will damage your spirit....⁹

“[Raising] a child is like pouring Miracle Grow on all your fears and character defects....”¹⁰ When I began to understand how hard it is to get mothering right, it was so much easier to forgive my own mother. Really, when she laments her parenting of me, how can the right response be anything but, “Mum, don’t worry about it. I didn’t turn out to be an axe-murderer.”

We can change the culture of the impossibility of good mothering by making room for mothers to tell their truths; by insuring that they don’t feel they are in it alone; and by encouraging the mothers in our lives. Part of that includes encouraging their delight in their kids. We can insist to mothers that their equanimity not be ruined by expectations – their own or others’ – or by some fantasy about whom they thought their kids should be or could be. It’s such a set-up; as it turns out, our children are not ours to make or break. They come with their own unique toughness and vulnerability, their own brittleness and resiliency, their own karma. We could all agree to surrender our expectations and just love our kids exactly as they are.

Ayelet Waldman writes, “... I think it’s worth trying to be a mother who delights in who her children are, in their knock-knock jokes and earnest questions. A mother who spends less time obsessing about what will happen, or what has happened, and more time reveling in what *is*. A mother who doesn’t fret over failings and slights, who realizes that her worries and anxieties are just thoughts, the continuous chattering and judgment of a too busy mind. A mother who doesn’t worry so much about being bad or good, but just recognizes that she’s both, and neither. A mother who does her best, and for whom that is good enough, even if, in the end, her best turns out to be, simply, not bad.”¹¹

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⁹ Anne Lamott, *Letter to a Pregnant Friend*, 10/24/03, in salon.com/2003/10/25/letter_10/

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¹¹ Waldman, pp. 207-208

Beloved spiritual companions,

In the Mothers' Index Rankings,
the U.S. occupies one of the lowest spots
held by any other comparably developed nation.

Being a good mother, as defined by mothers themselves, feels impossible.
Think Mary Poppins.

May we do our part to change the culture,
making room for mothers to tell their truths,
insuring that they don't feel they are in it alone,
encouraging the mothers in our lives,
encouraging their sheer delight in their kids ,
delight without condition.

We can change the culture of impossibility to possibility.
Let's change it.
Let's make as many days as possible a happy mothers' day.