

More Musings on Motherhood

Tracie A. Lamb

I was unprepared when my daughters became teenagers. In fact, I was blindsided by this phase of life. I never claimed to have native talent in mothering; but after years of study and practice, I thought I had gotten the hang of it a little. I have been proven sadly mistaken.

As I expressed in my first essay on motherhood,¹ written more than a decade ago, I found motherhood both exhilarating and overwhelming; but I never doubted that I would be a mother. As a good Mormon girl, I always had marriage and motherhood as my ultimate objectives. Even though I was also a returned missionary with a graduate degree, my life was not complete until I had children.

I believe in the gospel and the tenets of the Church. I usually believe in the plan of salvation, although there is nothing like parenting teenagers to make me question the wisdom of the eternal nature of the family. I believe what we as members have been taught since Primary. It is myself I doubt—although in my own defense, I have to say that having and raising children are the only things in my life I have done with clear intention. Most everything else I just sort of fell in to. From before my two daughters were born, before they even began, I studied and planned and prepared. I did not come to motherhood lightly, nor have I ever taken it lightly since.

Maybe that's part of the problem. I need to lighten up. Yet I accept the teachings of the Church that motherhood, parenthood, family are paramount in our existence. However, when I'm honest with myself, I have to acknowledge that I deeply resent being put in a position where the thing I have no talent for is the very thing that is supposed to be the most important and have eternal consequences. I have scratched and clawed my way to what I thought was at least competence in motherhood only to be thrown into the melee of my daughters' adolescence where nothing I thought I knew applies and everything I do seems to backfire.

One of the most difficult lessons of motherhood I have had to learn

is that my children are not me—in many cases, not even a close approximation thereof. I don't know if I came to the recognition of them as individuals more slowly than other mothers or if the intense intimacy of infancy and childhood requires a slow, torturous separation, but this lack of understanding has caused me not a little distress. Somewhere along the way, I had adopted the *tabula rasa* child-rearing philosophy. I don't think I read it directly in the very large pile of child-rearing books I went through, but somehow I came to believe that my child would come into my home and my life, I would teach her important principles, and she would learn them. In particular, I would impart the wisdom I gleaned from my experiences so she could avoid the pitfalls I had encountered. She would grow up knowing what to do and how to do it because I would teach her or find the best teacher I could for her. She would learn and do and we would all live happily ever after.

What I did not understand or refused to believe or somehow failed to grasp is that each child—even though from the same parents as her siblings, raised in the same house in the same way—comes with her own pre-assembled package. I encountered the practical application of the nature versus nurture dilemma. A child can be very different from her parents or siblings, or can be similar in some ways and different in others, a crazy combination of training and parents' and grandparents' personalities and characteristics, and on and on. Where did that propensity for adventure come from, or that eye for fashion, or that voluptuous shape, for heaven's sake? There is something inherently unfair about both daughters being generously proportioned while I have never had more than a hint of a bust line.

Of course, that physical difference has never really been a problem. It certainly hasn't caused the clashes that some other differences have since my daughters reached adolescence, not to mention the weird cosmic sense of humor that adds menopause to that pot.

I have always been a never-lose-anything, punctual, responsible kind of person. My older daughter is mercurial. She is wonderfully artistic and creative. She has an artist's eye (as well as an artist's temperament) and notices details that most others do not. I first realized this when she was much younger and we were in the doctor's office. She let out a shriek and I thought she had seen a spider or some other alarming thing. She said, "The plug-in is crooked," pointing to the wall in horror. I looked at her and looked at the wall socket. If I looked very closely, I could tell that it

was maybe a little crooked. I never would have noticed if she hadn't pointed it out, but to her, it was so obvious and disturbing that she was almost beside herself.

Recently, she had a similar reaction to balloon letters—some big, round letters used on a signboard. We were driving down the road, and she squealed in dismay. “If people can't make decent balloon letters,” she said in disgust, “they shouldn't try to make them at all.” Such things are very significant to her.

The difficulties come because many of the concerns of our lives are invisible to each other. We simply see the world differently. I realized this most clearly when my own mother was visiting. While I was at work, my mom asked my daughter to vacuum the hallway. The Saturday before, my daughter's chore had been vacuuming, which she had done, but she had left the vacuum by her bedroom door and never gotten around to putting it back in the coat closet where it belonged. Out of principle, I didn't put it away but waited for her to do it. For days, the vacuum sat in the hall, and every time she went in or out of her bedroom, she had to walk around it.

After waiting for a while for my daughter to vacuum, my mom asked her again if she wouldn't please do the vacuuming, to which my daughter replied, “But, Grandma, where is the vacuum?” It wasn't in the closet where it was supposed to be, and she simply hadn't noticed it otherwise. I want structure in my life, routine, clean rooms, and I'm darned good at organizing cupboards. “A place for everything and everything in its place,” sounds like heaven to me. She sees nuances of color, potential in chaos, freedom in disorder. She can create beauty out of nothing and whip up a poster or scrapbook page that looks professional.

My younger daughter, though more similar to me in some ways, has become an athlete and likes outdoor adventure. I have never been athletic and can think of few places I would rather *not* be than in a gym. She began life long and lean and stayed that way—always in the 90th percentile in height and the 50th percentile in weight. In addition, she routinely ended up in the hospital: dislocated elbow, swallowed penny, bumped chin, mangled toe. The absence of the robust, well-fed baby look and the frequent trips to the doctor made me think of her as a fragile little thing. And she is my youngest, so regardless of how big she gets, I will always see her through baby-colored glasses

My image of her was shattered, however, at Mount St. Helens when she was seven and her sister eleven. A good friend of mine came to visit

with her three boys who were similar in age to my girls. We went sightseeing to Ape Caves at Mount St. Helens and somehow ended up going on the most difficult hike through the cave. We were woefully unprepared and sadly misguided by the park ranger into thinking it was a hike manageable by two middle-aged women and their five young children. Nevertheless, four hours later, we made it through.

And who was in front like a little mountain goat, scouting the way, yelling back encouragement from her vantage point at the lead? My baby. Never again would I think of her as fragile when she was so obviously made for action and adventure. That trip to Mount St. Helens presaged a life of activity and a taste for travel. She is a proven champion, having made it to Nationals for the Junior Olympics in long jump (14'9" when she was twelve). That is *really* far. We were driving down the freeway once and saw an overpass with the height painted on it: 14'9". I pointed out how far she had jumped. We were both surprised by what a great distance it was.

She has a big world map on her wall with stars on it: green stars for places she has been and silver stars for places she wants to go. There are lots of stars of both colors all over. She went to Hawaii last spring, took scuba lessons, and went surfing. Going to Hawaii might seem like an extravagant thing for a thirteen-year-old to do except that she paid for it all herself. She has a real knack with money—something else I wish I had. I'm encouraging her to read up on investing because, with her ability to make money, she could make a killing on the stock market.

My little fragile baby has turned into an adventurous athlete without any help from me—well, other than the hours of driving to and sitting through track practice and meets, the money for training and travel, and my long legs—great for jumpers. I guess I did contribute to who she is, though in some ways we are so different.

Although our differences have caused us not a little trouble, I hope I have finally figured out that they really don't matter. My daughters do see things differently than I do, and often that's a good thing. They have an excitement and interest that I have little access to anymore—except when it comes to them. I admit I can be very intense when one of them is involved in a track meet, or a performance, or a competition of any kind. I acknowledge that I have stage-mother tendencies, but who wouldn't with stars like I have?

The first time I saw my older daughter do a waltz routine with her

ballroom dance team, I cried. She was just so beautiful and graceful. Was this lovely person really the teenager who not so long before had freaked out about her sister wearing her clothes and thrown the door open so hard it put a hole in the wall? Was this the girl who was impossible to get up for seminary in the morning or get to bed at a decent time at night? This lovely creature with her dark, thick hair, dark eyes, brilliant smile, almost ethereal in her graceful movements—was this my daughter? She’s forgetful and messy and always late. She’s clever and compassionate and creative beyond belief.

And her little sister, the gazelle-like creature who runs so fast and jumps so far. The little girl who disciplines herself to do a hundred sit-ups a night and grueling exercises up and down the field to strengthen her legs, who does push-ups in a handstand. Where is my frail little baby? Where did that determination come from that I see in her face as she races toward the finish line? Where did she get so much grace and ease under pressure?

Could it be that I’ve finally learned? They are not me. My daughters are themselves and they are wonderful.

Just as I begin to accept and incorporate the lesson that my daughters are and should be independent individuals, another lesson in parenting has been driven home to me. I have thought lately about the song that goes, “Is that all there is? Is that all there is, my friends? Then let’s keep dancing.” Because of my children, I can never say, “Is that all there is?” The roller coaster of motherhood has forced me to face my weaknesses, assess and reassess, plumb my depths over and over again. Instead of “Is that all there is?” I have often felt more like saying, “Enough already!”

As my older daughter has finished high school and prepared to go to college this year, one lesson has been that her life is no longer my work. Next to the divorce from their father eight years ago, nothing has been so hard on me as this transition from one phase of life to the next. A wise friend says God made the senior year of high school so that we would be able to let go of our children.

This transition has felt like a death. I have realized that I have been in mourning much of the time. This child, once my baby, is gone. I was the center of her universe. Her very existence depended on my care. Now she is a young woman diverging not only from me but also from my vision of who she should be. I careen between grief and relief at her leaving.

The teachings of the Church are such a blessing in raising children

in so many ways; but at the moment, I find them problematic and at the heart of much of my difficulty. What we as Latter-day Saints expect from our children goes against almost everything they get from mainstream society. I always believed that I could be happy for and supportive of my daughters' individuality, but my lovely daughter is choosing a path that does not follow my idea of what she should become or what we are taught at church.

When she got her eyebrow pierced recently, I have to admit that one of my first thoughts was of what the people in the ward would think. Once I got past that shallowness, I realized that the deeper concern was the rift between her and members of the Church that her piercing would create. All of the dear friends in our ward know what a fine person she is and how this piercing is probably just her artistic outlet. But she is no longer in our ward. What will the members in her new ward think—if she decides to go to church at all? Whether the decision was conscious or not, the piercing will put a barrier between herself and her church.

And there is nothing I can do about it. A huge challenge of being a Mormon with teenagers is feeling such a heavy responsibility and yet having so little influence. Sometimes it makes me want to wash my hands of her now that she is eighteen. I am not sure how to let go of the responsibility and control without letting go of the relationship. Nevertheless, here is my most important lesson: Although we are told, "No success can compensate for failure in the home," we are taught even more emphatically to "Love one another." A woman I greatly respect put it this way in a word of advice to me: "Don't make not being part of the Church the deal-breaker for being part of the family."

I believe I need to measure success differently right now. I am successful as a mother if my daughter feels loved when she is with me. I am successful if she is comfortable sharing details of her life with me even though sometimes it is painful for me to hear them. I am successful if she feels that we have a good relationship. The last few months, I have been using a quotation from Sister Marjorie Hinckley as my mantra, "Save the relationship first." Many of my former goals and ideals have fallen away as dross in this latest refiner's fire and have left relating to my daughter in a positive way as the single shiny nugget I cling to.

I have heard that mothers and daughters can become good friends in adulthood. I am hoping that it is true, which is another reason I am trying not to sabotage our relationship. I am trying to be more flexible and

less judgmental, more available and less demanding, more willing to listen and less to talk. And I'm learning to let go of things that are not so important and cleave ferociously to those that are.

Note

1. See my "Musings on Motherhood," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 21–25.