

Somebody's Mother's

**SOMEBODY'S MOTHER'S
OBSERVATIONS ON PARENTING & LIFE**

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Foreword

If a license were required to have children, with a certain number of prerequisites to be completed before accreditation, there would be no need for this book. People more learned than I could teach others who, if they didn't get it, could actually flunk parenting and be judged "not yet ready" which, in many instances, would be a blessing. I'm not a therapist, a counselor, a member of the clergy, a teacher, coach or social worker. I'm just somebody's mother and these are some of the things I've learned along the way.

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CHAPTER ONE: WHEN YOU'RE IT

Enjoy your youth. Go to school, finish school. Read. Travel, if you can. Loll about. Do some really nice things for other people. Rent. On more occasions than not, be recreationally irresponsible. Stay out late dancing. Dream in the bathtub. Develop an identity and hang on to it. Figure out what you believe in and polish it up. Put yourself first and then, slowly, begin to leave behind the childish thought that you should come first. My mother says having children is a lifetime sentence.

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CHAPTER TWO: PREGNANCY

By 2013, 50% of all obstetricians/gynecologists will be women. Find one.

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CHAPTER THREE: UNCLE WIGGLY

When my first child was about 3 months old, I came home from work to find her crying in the arms of her babysitter, Jane Sewell. I presumed as my mother and grandmother had, that the baby was “hungry, tired or needed to be changed”. Nurse Jane Fuzzy Wuzzy, as we began to call her because we remembered Uncle Wiggly, was not rocking or patting her or singing. She was just rubbing the baby’s head from front to back. She looked up at me and asked, “How do we know they don’t have headaches?” That question changed my thinking about babies and parenting. You might as well believe that babies are just small human beings who, unlike us, cannot tell us where it hurts, what feels good or what frightens them. It makes sense and it will come in handy. The notion of empathy that Jane suggested is the one that makes you be on time for carpool, if not always, at least almost always no matter what.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINIALS

Once, and only once, I went to a parenting seminar. I would have gone to others, but after the baby was born I spent every spare, sleep-deprived moment I had trying to complete my own bath, or merely synapse in the comfort of my own home. The speaker, the expert, was clever and funny. He described what it was like for him to be a new parent. His story went something like this: “I was sitting in a chair holding the baby while my wife ran an errand. I was nervous. I spotted a lamp on a table across the room and began to imagine that it suddenly fell off the table, rolled across the living room floor all the way over to where I was sitting, climbed up my leg and then my arm, turned itself on its side and lunged upward so that its finial plunged into the soft spot of the baby’s head and lodged there. Base up. Permanently. Forever.” As a term, “finials” are useful when describing anxiety to your therapist or to your older child while suggesting that he drive in the middle lane while going over a bridge, or ride a bus, not the subway, while in New York alone because the terrorists might bomb the subways and there you’d be dead and underground, covered with dust and torn pages of Rolling Stone. In short, “finials” describe anticipatory despair, a state of mind with which you should become intimate, and the only real cause of aging in parents.

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CHAPTER FIVE: SPEAKING OF THERAPISTS

Therapy is expensive. Feel free (something should be) to throw up on your mother, your minister, your best friend, your worst enemy, your brother-in-law, a neighbor or anyone else who's ever had a child. Massage every lousy childhood memory of your own. Relive every slight and the horror of adolescence. Ruminates. Obsess. Dwell on your parents' every quarrel, the fourth grade teacher who traumatized you with new math and the time your father got rid of your toy soldier collection for no reason. Then, SNAP OUT OF IT. Throw out what was bad about your own childhood. Treasure the good memories. Resolve to do it differently and better for your own children. For God's sake, let them have childhoods: barefooted, popsicle dripping, mosquito bitten, sun-burned, lightening bug collecting, butterfly chasing, beach going, snowball fighting, backyard fort building, unfettered, under-scheduled stare at the clouds and dream days. Keep your agenda to yourself. Your unrealized dreams are not your children's to own. If you're having a hard time, get help from a professional who can prescribe. Don't be afraid of antidepressants. One of the few things you actually "owe" your child is cheerfulness. Life is difficult enough.

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CHAPTER SIX: HUMOR

Laugh early and often with your children. Laugh at them, with them, and around them. And mostly, laugh at yourself. When I was going through a terrible divorce and the children were very young, I worried about them because there wasn't much to laugh about. I thought Murphy Brown was really funny so I instituted a homework ban for that half hour and made them watch with me. It wasn't that it was so appropriate or that they understood much, but I thought it was really good for them to see me squeal with laughter. I think it reassured them. They remember it. Any sitcom will do. Right now I'm partial to watching Ellen dance.

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CHAPTER SEVEN: RESPECT

I've heard parents who are just hideous, complain that their children aren't respectful. Mind you, they think they're automatically entitled to respect. What's up with that? If you want your children to respect you, model respectful behavior to others - especially children, especially your own. Treat them gently and with great care. They are watching you and they will get who and what you are. Do not tell big or little lies to your children. For example, if you are leaving the house and you know your very young child will cry, it is a huge temptation to sneak out to save yourself. I think it's better to take the time to let him know you're leaving, you're sorry it makes him sad and you'll be back. And then, just let him cry. The point is what it always is about lying. The little ones make the big ones easier to tell. Believe me, you won't want your children lying to you. The stakes are usually too high. You should probably quit swilling tequila. Visit someone else's church with an open mind. Defend the weak. Show compassion. Practice what you preach. Stand for something. Respectfully disagree. In short, be respectable. If you have trouble with this concept, reread *To Kill A Mockingbird* and think often of Atticus.

CHAPTER EIGHT: BOUNDARIES AND MANNERS

Unfortunately for children, especially older teenagers, not everything you do is their business. However, the reverse is true. Remember, among your many charges is to keep them off junk and out of jail, and to ensure that they are decent citizens of the planet. Thus, by all means, knock and ask if it's ok before you enter their rooms. Don't read their e-mails, rifle through their drawers or call the teacher anyway if you promised you wouldn't. Keep their secrets, the harmless ones, if they ask you to. They won't know if you tell your best friend, but you will. (See "RESPECT"). If you are single especially, under no circumstances is your sex life their business. Usually, this is not an issue because they find the subject appalling, anatomically impossible and disgusting.

With respect to manners, nag. It's never too early to start. If they can walk, they can learn to shake hands. They should, indeed, stand up if an older person walks in the room or over to your table. Always. Teach them which fork to use and how to hold it. And when to wear a coat and tie. Teach them to thank profusely. The school custodian or the school principal equally. Answer the telephone properly. Take a message. In the South, we still teach children to say, "Yes sir and yes ma'am". Look people in the eye. Stand up straight. I think one of our real problems is that we mistake intimacy for an excuse to drop the practice of good manners. Teach your child to be polite to her close friends, and to her siblings, not just old people like you. One day someone in the grocery store will compliment you for your children's nice manners and the nagging will have been worth it. Then you will go home, pass along the compliment and begin again.

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CHAPTER NINE: BEDTIME

With infants at bedtime, the less snuggling the better and it's one of the few times less snuggling, rather than more, is good. When they are several months old, if they cry when you put them down, the rule is to let them- anywhere from 20-45 minutes or until you die. When they are young toddlers, snuggle, read and tuck them in, ever so gently. It's such a sweet time and sooner than you think you will actively, passionately miss "Goodnight Moon" which you will have once memorized and since forgotten. But not completely. My oldest daughter did not sleep through the night, not once, until the day we brought her baby sister home from the hospital. I never could get past 19 minutes. She was three. I think she had been lonesome. With respect to the issue of whether or not to let your children sleep with you, it's probably not a good idea to let them start out there. Here are my suggestions: If he falls asleep in your bed, carry him into his own bed. If she wakes up and cries while still sleeping in a crib, and is thus still a prisoner, check to make sure the ceiling did not collapse. (See "FINIALS"). Offer a few soothing words without picking her up, leave and make a deal with God that you will never ever ask for anything for yourself as long as you live or be overdrawn, ever again, if She will just let you have that one night of uninterrupted sleep. Swear. However, if he wakes up in the middle of the night having had a nightmare about a huge, hideous African Gaboon viper that entered his bedroom through the Spiderman night-light socket, scoot over. No matter what your pediatrician or your mother says, if you can resist a 3-year old in feet pajamas who smells like baby lotion, in your bed, snuggled as close as is humanly possible to your cellulite-riddled post-partum body that no one else would touch, you are cold, cruel and sick and don't deserve children.

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CHAPTER TEN: ROUTINE

Having a baby is disruptive. The sooner you develop a newborn's schedule for eating and sleeping, the more time you will have for your principal pastime, worrying. My mother told me, among other things, to bathe the baby at 10 a.m., feed her, burp her and put her down for a nice long nap. The added bonus was that it would give her a sense of security to know that certain things happened at the same time each day. I believe that. It sounded like a chaos-limiting move, and then one day I found myself dangling a naked 3 week old over the bathroom sink watching the clock tick 9:57, 9:58, 9:59...I was not a well woman.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: BEING PRESENT

You don't just wake up one day with a reasonably civilized 15 year old. Years and years of being present are required. In addition to being physically present, I mean mentally and emotionally. If you're drunk, you're not there. If you're always on the cell phone or the computer, you're not there. If you have ADHD and are in constant motion and distracted, you're not there. Conversely, you can be at work and still be there. One of the prerequisites for success is that you put your children first. By this, I don't mean that you should be hyper-vigilant or that you breed entitlement by constantly giving them things, or always giving in. You must and should have a life of your own. But, in a global sense, let their needs and what is best for them be your first priority. Listen, talk and be engaged in your relationship with them.

I'm a believer in happy and cheerful sacrifice. Not martyrdom, but commitment. To be successful requires constant observation, sometimes from the perimeter, and a certain amount of agility because children grow like mad and their needs change sometimes intra-day. If you've ever had a two year old, you know that they like to wander away and then turn around to see if you're still there. If you are, they feel braver and sometimes walk on a little farther. Lately, I've noticed that phenomenon recurring in my teenagers. When my son first got his driver's license last summer, I sensed he wanted to be the one who left me. And in the beginning, he wanted me to be there when he got home. Not obviously so but there, nonetheless, maybe just reading. That is how it should be. One of the main responsibilities you have to your children is to fulfill your own functional obsolescence. It requires exquisite timing.

CHAPTER TWELVE: SINGLE PARENTING, SPORTS AND THINGS

I was a competitive golfer by the age of seven and a competitive tennis player by the age of nine. I have two daughters whose idea of physical exertion is to walk fast while shopping. The Universe works in strange ways.

My son, however, loves sports and it was with some confidence that I dropped him off at the Little League field for the first time. I was a single mother and working by the time he was three so I was really looking forward to his bonding with the guys, the other six-year olds. All the fathers were there, each playing catch with his own son. All their sons, and not mine, had already had been to baseball camps so it didn't take long for me to figure out that, yet again, I had permanently ruined my child's self-esteem. I backed up, parked the car, introduced myself to the coaches and thus began one of the best experiences of my son's life and my own. Thanks to the head coach, Tom Martin, who became my dear friend because he was so kind, I began to go to all the practices, play catch with my own son and the other boys. I was actually invited into the dugout to help coach. I observed how men and boys communicate. Unlike girls, it is essentially a non-verbal, tactile, always understated and primitive ritual that includes a lot of nodding and grunting, head rubbing and slapping: backs, shoulders and bottoms. The point? You don't have to be a man to be a good father or a woman to be a good mother.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN: SCHOOL

Most children seem to like school most of the time. The one thing that's really bad about a lot of schools today is that parents spend too much time there. Helicoptering and mucking things up. Unless your child is having trouble, is a bully or is being bullied I think you should stay out of the fray. If, for example, you have already been a Class Mom once, sign up for yoga at the Y or bead shoes in your off-hours. Do, however, demand Phonics. Scream and stomp about for Phonics. Start a petition and don't take no for an answer. While you're at it, beg for grammar. Once I asked a teacher why she didn't spend more time teaching grammar. She said because the children found it "boring" to learn and she found it "boring" to teach. Unless you want to spend the rest of your child's high school career overhearing, "We would have drank more, but the police came.", lobby for "boring". Often the following things are also "boring": working, working two jobs, paying bills, driving carpools, marriage, in-laws, illness, jail, and not being able to work two jobs.

For young children, school playgrounds are mini-life. They don't know it but you do. It's a good place to learn about sharing, manners, including rather than excluding, and standing up for yourself and those who don't yet know how. Tell your child even if he isn't the biggest guy on the playground he has an obligation to look out for others. He'll feel big.

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Coming Soon