

A Mother's Day Message: Wise Words from Anna Quindlen

This essay, plucked from Anna Quindlen's book "Loud and Clear," is lengthy, but well worth the time. It seems unlikely that we will one day be in the shoes of Anna Quindlen, looking back and remembering the struggles and heartbreaking joys of day-to-day mothering. But there it is.

If not for the photographs I might have a hard time believing they ever existed. The pensive infant with the swipe of dark bangs and the black button eyes of a Raggedy Andy doll. The placid baby with the yellow ringlets and the high piping voice. The sturdy toddler with the lower lip that curled into an apostrophe above her chin.

All my babies are gone now. I say this not in sorrow but in disbelief. I take great satisfaction in what I have today: three almost adults, two taller than me, one closing in fast. Three people who read the same books I do and have learned not to be afraid of disagreeing with me in their opinion of them, who sometimes tell vulgar jokes that make me laugh until I choke and cry, who need razor blades and shower gel and privacy, who want to keep their doors closed more than I like. Who, miraculously, go to the bathroom, zip up their jackets, and move food from plate to mouth all by themselves. Like the trick soap I bought for the bathroom with a rubber ducky at its center, the baby is buried deep within each, barely discernible except through the unreliable haze of the past.

Everything in all the books I once pored over is finished for me now. Penelope Leach. Berry Brazelton. Dr. Spock. The ones on sibling rivalry and sleeping through the night and early childhood education, all grown obsolete. Along with Goodnight Moon and Where the Wild Things Are, they are battered, spotted, well used. But I suspect that if you flipped the pages, dust would rise like memories.

What those books taught me, finally, and what the women on the playground taught me, and the well-meaning relations and the older parents at cocktail parties—what they taught me was that they couldn't really teach me very much at all. Raising children is presented at first as a true-false test, then becomes multiple choice, until finally, far along, you realize that it is an endless essay. No one knows anything. One child responds well to positive reinforcement, another can only be managed with a stern voice and a time-out. One boy is toilet trained at three, his brother at two. When my first child was born, parents were told to put baby to bed on his belly so that he would not choke on his own spit-up. By the time my last arrived, babies were put down on their backs because of research on sudden infant death syndrome.

As a new parent this ever-shifting certainty is terrifying, and then soothing. Eventually you must learn to trust yourself. Eventually the research will follow. First science told us they

were insensate blobs. But we thought they were looking, and watching, and learning, even when they spent so much time hitting themselves in the face. And eventually science said that we were right, that important cognitive function began in early babyhood. First science said they should be put on a feeding schedule. But sometimes they seemed hungry in two hours, sometimes three, sometimes all the time, so that we never even bothered to button up. And eventually science said that that was right, and that they would be best fed on demand. First science said environment was the great shaper of human nature. But it certainly seemed as though those babies had distinct personalities, some contemplative, some gregarious, some crabby. And eventually science said that was right, too, and that they were hardwired exactly as we had suspected.

Still, the temptation to defer to the experts was huge. The literate parent, who approaches everything—cooking, decorating, life—as though there was a paper due or an exam scheduled is in particular peril when the kids arrive. How silly it all seems now, obsessing about language acquisition and physical milestones, riding the waves of normal, gifted, hyperactive, all those labels that reduced individuality to a series of cubbyholes. But I could not help myself. I had watched my mother casually raise five children born over ten years, but by watching her I intuitively knew that I was engaged in the greatest—and potentially most catastrophic—task of my life. I knew that there were mothers who had worried with good reason, that there were children who would have great challenges to meet. We were lucky; ours were not among them. Nothing horrible or astonishing happened: There was hernia surgery, some stitches, a broken arm and a fuchsia cast to go with it.

Mostly ours were the ordinary everyday terrors and miracles of raising a child, and our children's challenges the old familiar ones of learning to live as themselves in the world. The trick was to get past my fears, my ego, and my inadequacies to help them do that. During my first pregnancy I picked up a set of lovely old clothbound books at a flea market. Published in 1933, they were called *Mother's Encyclopedia*, and one volume described what a mother needs to be: "psychologically good: sound, wholesome, healthy, unafraid, able to deal with the world and to live in this particular age, an integrated personality, an adjusted person." In a word, yow.

It is good that we know so much more now, know that mothers need not be perfect to be successful. But some of what we learn is as pernicious as that daunting description, calculated to make us feel like failures every single day. I remember fifteen years ago poring over one of Dr. Brazelton's wonderful books on child development, in which he describes three different sorts of infants: average, quiet, and active. I was looking for a sub-quiet codicil (see: slug) for an eighteen-month-old who did not walk. Was there something wrong with his fat little legs? Was there something wrong with his tiny little mind? Was he developmentally delayed,

physically challenged? Was I insane? Last year he went to China. Next year he goes to college. He can walk just fine. He can walk too well. Every part of raising children at some point comes down to this: Be careful what you wish for.

Every part of raising children is humbling, too. Believe me, mistakes were made. They have all been enshrined in the “Remember When Mom Did” Hall of Fame. The outbursts, the temper tantrums, the bad language—mine, not theirs. The times the baby fell off the bed. The times I arrived late for preschool pickup. The nightmare sleepover. The horrible summer camp. The day when the youngest came barreling out of the classroom with a 98 on her geography test, and I responded, “What did you get wrong?” (She insisted I include that.) The time I ordered food at the McDonald’s drive-through speaker and then drove away without picking it up from the window. (They all insisted I include that.) I did not allow them to watch *The Simpsons* for the first two seasons. What was I thinking?

But the biggest mistake I made is the one that most of us make while doing this. I did not live in the moment enough. This is particularly clear now that the moment is gone, captured only in photographs. There is one picture of the three of them sitting in the grass on a quilt in the shadow of the swing set on a summer day, ages six, four, and one. And I wish I could remember what we ate, and what we talked about, and how they sounded, and how they looked when they slept that night. I wish I had not been in such a hurry to get on to the next thing: dinner, bath, book, bed. I wish I had treasured the doing a little more and the getting it done a little less.

Even today I’m not sure what worked and what didn’t, what was me and what was simply life. How much influence did I really have over the personality of the former baby who cried only when we gave parties and who today, as a teenager, still dislikes socializing and crowds? When they were very small I suppose I thought someday they would become who they were because of what I’d done. Now I suspect they simply grew into their true selves because they demanded in a thousand ways that I back off and let them be.

There was babbling I forgot to do, stimulation they never got, foods I meant to introduce and never got around to introducing. If a black-and-white mobile really increases depth perception and early exposure to classical music increases the likelihood of perfect pitch, I blew it. The books said to be relaxed and I was often tense, matter-of-fact, and I was sometimes over-the-top. And look how it all turned out. I wound up with the three people I like best in the world, who have done more than anyone to excavate my essential humanity. That’s what the books never told me. I was bound and determined to learn from the experts. It just took me a while to figure out who the experts were.