

May 9, 2012

## **I'm Past All That**

*Learning to listen to your own kid, not the voices in your head*

BY [TERESA STRASSER](#)

There is some unwritten statute of limitations on how long one can whine about a crappy childhood, a negligent parent, a few too many chicken pot pies, summers with the grandparents, days spent on Greyhound buses and with dubious caregivers and creepy neighbors. There is just a moment in an adult's life when the complaining and sad-sacking about how our parents got divorced, or lost custody, or bailed, or otherwise stank up the joint is just kind of pathetic. Let's face it, that moment had come and gone for me.

Then I had a child myself, and twinges of pain in that amputated leg known as my relationship with my mother started to send fiery jolts into my nervous system. I thought I would get a do-over (as opposed to my childhood, which was a do-under), but instead I got something unexpected: When my son was around 18 months old, I started to freak out. Whatever it is that made her look at the job of motherhood the way an angry teenager views a Friday night shift behind the Frialator, whatever she had, maybe I caught it.

This is the day, I would think, driving my toddler to day care, or swinging him at the park, or slipping a Grover T-shirt over his giant, blond head, this is the day it happens. This is the day I start to suck at this. This is the day I start to hate it. This is the day of reckoning, when I realize that I've been judging my mom for not enjoying my company or any part of raising me, but I'm no better. And this is the day the symptoms start manifesting in me. This is the day I realize that while I see other mothers having moments of both great struggle and magical, indescribable delight, I will only experience the former, because there are just some bullets you can't dodge.

When I started to panic about my ability to be a parent, it wasn't about physically being there or providing, it was about something else; it was about the ineffable ability to enjoy my child, because as sure as I won't forget the phone number of Haystack Pizza down the street, or the smell of the back of a city bus during Indian summer, or the look of abject boredom on my mom's face across the dinner table, I also won't forget the feeling of being a tedious wretch, a burden that was ruining everything.

Here's where having an OK childhood rescues you. Most new moms, I gather, realize early on that the venture isn't wholly exalted.

They catch on to the reality that normal might mean 17 thrilling, awe-inspiring minutes in a 12-hour day of parenting. Kids can be annoying, they can dawdle, they can cry uncontrollably at what to us is nothing (the green cup is dirty, here's the yellow one; see you in 27 minutes when you have come back from the brink of insanity). They can be scary, flying off couches and spiking high fevers. They can be, as a matter of course, a bit dull, unless watching the same video of a garbage truck dumping a bin of trash into its hopper repeatedly on YouTube is somehow gratifying for you.

It was about a month into my panic when I turned the ship around. And by the ship I mean my Honda. My son, on the way to day care, uncharacteristically moaned from his car seat, "Don't want to go to school."

We pulled over into the parking lot of an Albertsons. I stared back at him.

"Want to ride train," he said. A tear fell onto his puffy coat.

That was the moment, wedged between a meth-head blasting classical music from his station wagon and a Mini-Cooper glinting in the sun, that I became not a woman running from a fear that she will fail at parenting, but a woman running toward one simple day at the mall with her baby. And off we went to the

indoor mall in Sherman Oaks with the Ladybug train that runs past the chain stores all day long. Phoning day care to say we wouldn't make it, cancelling any plans I had for that day, I knew that nothing could make me happier, and in knowing that, I was at least partially free.

If I love being with this boy, even just to share a Wetzell and ride a rickety indoor train for hours, if I love this more than anything else I could possibly imagine doing today, then I can stop worrying. If I had been playing tag with the bogeyman that was "turning into my mother," this was one very small, yet somehow enormous, "NOT IT."

No one in my family is sentimental, and I think that's OK. I don't have a baby book for my son, I didn't keep track of when he got his first tooth or tricycle.

That's why lately, pregnant with my second boy, when I have syrupy thoughts about the baby I can only just now feel moving and kicking, it's like a million cars turning around in a million parking lots. I love you already, I think, as I rub my hand over my stomach. Sappy. However, when I find myself thinking that this little being is good company already, and enjoying him even now, before he is born, I feel myself turning and turning in the right direction.

In a way, it's not about my own mother anymore. I may not honor her, specifically, but as I think about that commandment I think the best I can do is to honor motherhood in general, and I can only do that by letting myself get better at it as I go. It's on me now, as it has been for a very long time.

It's on me to know that sometimes it's OK to be less than thrilled with the minutiae of motherhood, the ordering of diaper cream online, the scraping of uneaten carrots from an Elmo plate. It's OK.

As long as there are days, and they will come when I can't predict them, when my main function in this life is not to drive my babies forward, but to turn them around. If I can find supreme usefulness in sitting on a train to nowhere, just staring at my baby as he stares into the world, just taking him in and letting the smell of his hair and the feel of his chubby hands fall into the pages of the baby book in my mind, I am not just avoiding becoming my mother, I am getting to stop at all the stations she missed. "All aboard," says my son to the mall conductor. All aboard.

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