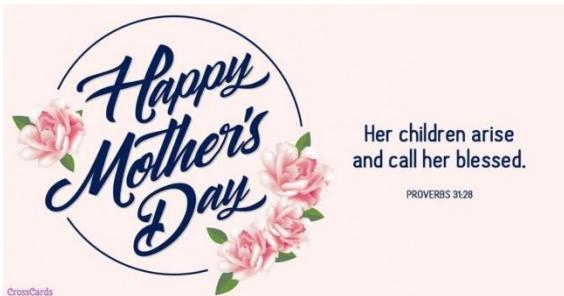


Morning, Night and Afternoon: Reflections on Motherhood

by Mary Jo Cartwright



I never imagined a Mother's Day when I would not be able to hug my grown-up children, my sweet grandson or my mother, simply because they did not live in my house. Did you? It sounds like a cruel, painful joke or something from science fiction.

And yet, here we are, on Mother's Day 2020.

The irony of these strange, pandemic times is that to best protect, care for and show the immense depth of our motherly love, we need to go against all our instincts and physically distance ourselves from our precious children, grandchildren and parents.

The ache of that longing is real; we feel it in our bones, and it's a big sacrifice. One more to add to the many we have made as mothers, and to the sacrifices of our mothers and grandmothers before us.

But with God's grace – and the help of technology – we are finding new, creative ways to express our love to those we have nurtured, and the ones who have nurtured us. As in other times of great challenge and difficulty, God is always there to guide our hearts, hands and minds – providing His comfort and the assurance that this too shall pass. What a welcome gift and relief that is!

From the second that first tiny baby came into my life 36 years ago, and his two precious brothers after that, I knew a love like no other. My life changed forever, and for the better. That moment was at once thrilling, awe-inspiring, humbling – and terrifying. Ask any mother and she will tell you that no matter what career path she has chosen, being the best possible mother is the toughest and most important job of all. The task of raising a new generation of humans to maturity is both an incredible gift and an immense, sometimes overwhelming responsibility. It's one I couldn't have done without God in my corner, the Blessed Virgin Mary as a spiritual role model, and the help and partnership of my loving, supportive husband throughout.

Life at the Ponderosa, as we affectionately call our home, was always an adventure with three busy boys to raise. Sometimes it was organized (chaos), other times a three-ring circus and occasionally a combination of both. As well as the great joys and surprises, there were the inevitable sleepless nights, trips to the Emergency Department and worries both big and small. I admit there was the odd day during their teenage years when I truly wondered, aloud – as the only woman in the house – what God was

thinking when he sent all that testosterone into my life! However, on most days I thanked Him for lending me (and us) those three special human beings for a while.

Many career paths have a set of required credentials, qualifications, skills and perhaps even board-certified exams. But the all-important job of mothering comes without any manual! A tiny, beautiful, wriggling baby is put into your arms... and presto, now he or she is dependent on you for survival, 24/7. For about 18 years.

Yes, there are now guidebooks galore, online resources, support groups and perhaps frantic calls to other mothers to seek their timely advice. Have you been there? But ultimately, each mother just figures it out. She evaluates all those suggestions, uses her God-given common sense, prays for patience and fortitude, and tries various strategies until she finds one that works.

The beautiful and mystifying part of it is that no two children are alike – even in a family where all are the same gender. That was certainly true in our house. I often described my three boys as morning, night and afternoon. The winning tactic that works best with one child may not work at all with another! And there it is again: God's infinite wisdom and perfect design at work, making the world a kaleidoscopic array of unique personalities, traits and physical attributes. It never ceases to amaze me.

My remarkable mother, who this summer will celebrate 90 years of being loved, had a very fitting and perfect description of this phenomenon. She once explained to a teacher that she had five children – then held up her hand with the fingers outstretched, and pointed out that each finger was entirely separate and unique from the others. All five were necessary to enable the hand to work well, she said, but they were all very different; so why would the teacher expect my two brothers to be alike in temperament?

That is only one of the many thousands of life lessons I have learned from my greatest teacher and mentor ever. My mother was Child #6, born at home at the start of the Great Depression, to a mother extraordinaire who raised nine children. It was a hard-working family with Italian roots, traditions and passions – one that celebrated feast days, birthdays and holidays with exuberant joy and wonderful food, despite the very tough times.

In that busy household, my mother learned everything she needed to know about sharing, responsibility, respect, sacrifice, expecting the unexpected, and finding great joy in even the smallest, simplest thing. How grateful I am to have her, and to have learned from her wisdom for these many decades! And I'm twice blessed, because for 40 years I have also had a mother-in-law that every married person dreams of having. She is kind, generous, loving and patient, talented and spiritual, even at 92.

On this very different Mother's Day, a heartfelt note of thanks to God, for the huge privilege of being a mother; to my two amazing mothers, and my grandmothers; to my husband, for sharing the journey; and to the three wonderful men who are my children.