

THE GOOD-ENOUGH MOTHER May 13, 2007

Wouldn't it be great if we were all perfect? If we all were bright, intelligent, good-looking? If we were all well groomed, well behaved, and knew and practiced the rules of polite behavior? It might be a little boring, but the world would be a much more attractive as well as peaceful place. Relax, there is no fear of that. All of us exist in a condition of imperfection. No matter how great and lovable we are, we are imperfect. And, no matter how much we strive, we can only come closer to, but never reach – perfection.

Don't we who are mothers wish we were perfect at that task? And all of us who have or had mothers—don't we wish they had been perfect? I remember that the culture of the 1950s and early 60s taught women that they must be perfect mothers. Popular television shows of the day emphasized this. June Cleaver did it all in high heels and without mussing her hair. We've had a lot of changes since then, however, this ideal of motherhood seems to have endured in our subconscious, even as other myths were left behind.

If the Hallmark Mom was epitomized by the perfect TV moms of the 50s, the evil stepmother of Fairy Tales epitomized her opposite, especially as presented by the Disney studios. Psychologists tell us that the evil stepmother classically represented the Bad Mother. The Bad Mother did not care for her children adequately; indeed she sometimes put them in danger. The Bad Mother was narcissistic, peering into mirrors and fearing the time when her daughter grew to be *fairer* than she. Sometimes the Bad Mother lost her temper and screamed and yelled at her children. Sometimes she even beat them. Few of us aspire to be Bad Mothers.

However, most of us realize that perfection is beyond our reach. So, where is our model of motherhood? And how do we get there? Let me suggest that we who are mothers can aspire to be good enough mothers. And that we who are fathers can aspire to be good enough fathers. Further, let me suggest that we can expect no more than *good enough* from those who are our mothers and fathers. Let us explore together these ideas.

For my generation of parenting, Dr. Spock was the first practical advisor we encountered. Somebody gave me a copy of Dr. Spock's manual of infant and childcare when I was pregnant with my first child. I don't know how many copies I went through, but he accompanied me on every trip to a new state or country during 20 years as an army officer's wife. The last copy resided, tattered and torn, on a bookcase for many years after I was no longer actively mothering.

Dr. Spock was reassuring. Mothers, even new mothers, he told us, have good natural instincts. They usually know when a baby is hungry, or tired, or cold. They know a fussy cry from a cry of pain. They know when to take a baby to the doctor, and when to nurse him or her through a sniffly spell at home. They know that a clean baby is happier than a dirty baby. Furthermore, everyone makes a mistake occasionally, but babies are remarkably resilient. They really don't break easily. Dr. Spock said nothing about making a baby stick to a prescribed schedule of feeding; nothing about demanding perfection. Dr. Spock was my generation's parenting guru.

Other, similar, gurus appeared for following generations. Dr. Brazleton followed Dr. Spock, and then I stopped paying attention.

Both of them, and many of their colleagues tried to alleviate the Hallmark Mom model of mothering. They were advocates of what I am naming *The Good Enough Mother*.

So, what are some of the qualities of *The Good Enough Mother*?

First and foremost, she loves her children—and her spouse if she has one, and probably the larger world. The Good Enough Mother makes her decisions based on this love. She knows that children who grow up undisciplined do not develop into responsible, self-sufficient adults, so she practices consistent discipline in her relations with her children. She knows that children who fail to learn to look with eyes of compassion at the suffering in the world are lacking in depth and satisfaction. Thus, she teaches them, probably experientially, that all people have worth and dignity, and that not all people are fortunate enough to be able to support themselves in a manner that reflects this fact.

She knows that people who do not have a theology that answers questions of meaning live shallow, unfulfilled lives. Therefore she finds a faith community that reflects her values to help her children become adults who live meaningful lives. All of these decisions are based on her love for her children.

2

Secondly, she cares for them to the best of her ability. However, she recognizes her own humanity, her own inability to be right all the time, to be perfect. She feeds her children healthy food, as she understands what that means. The knowledge of what is needed for a basic healthy diet increases every year. Some of what is learned modifies what we earlier understood. We can only do the best we can with what we know at any specific time. If, at some time in the future, food scientists learn that spinach is really a slow poison, I shall regret feeding it to my children. If, on the other hand, they learn that eggplant contains a miracle molecule that prevents the common cold, I shall regret not doing more to persuade them that it was a necessary item in their diet.

But we can only do the best we can with our current knowledge. And we cannot allow ourselves to be frozen into passivity by the knowledge that we may learn more later. The Good Enough Mother or Father will do the best they can, and know that they will make errors because they are only human.

The Good Enough Mother, recognizing that she is imperfect, is willing to seek and use help from others. She, and her co-parenting spouse, will find a community that supports their values. She knows that if her children have friends who are parented with similar values, they will be more likely to share similar interests. And parents who share her values will know what kind of activities are appropriate. They will know when to notify her of misbehavior, and have a better idea of how to handle it. They will know what kind of Divinity shapes her ethics and morals, and shape their language accordingly. The Good Enough Mother and Father do not think they have to do it all alone.

Finally, the Good Enough Mother knows that, while she will always love her children, loving includes letting go. She knows that she may never feel like her children are completely finished with their growth and development. However, they cannot reach that goal unless she is willing to give them their freedom. This may be one of the most difficult lessons of parenting to implement. Knowing it is necessary is intellectually easy.

2

Acting upon it is not. The Good Enough Mother struggles to release her child into adulthood, perhaps in stages, and at the proper time in the child's development.

Thus, the Good Enough Mother must love her children, do the best she, an imperfect human can do to rear her child, and let him or her go, when the timing is right. This is a model to which we can aspire!

This concept releases us from the tyranny of perfectionism. Too many of us try to be perfect in the work place and perfect at home. I was guilty of this search for perfection when I was rearing my three children. I especially tried to avoid screaming and yelling. (We already said this is a symptom

of a Bad Mother.) This was relatively easy with my first two children. However, the third was far more of a challenge. He was hyperactive, and early learned to avoid learning that which he did not wish to learn—like tying his shoes.

Velcro existed in those days, however no one had yet had the brilliant idea of fastening the shoes of young children with the miracle tape. Shoelaces were the only option. I was determined that my son would learn to tie his shoes before he went to school, however, he did not share my interest. Furthermore, he had two older sisters who were very good at tying shoes.

I can remember waking up in the morning on those school days when he was in the first grade, and saying to myself, "This morning I will NOT yell at Richard before he leaves for the school bus." Once in a while I could make it—but on those days when PMS marked my disposition, I just couldn't do it.

I did not approve of mothers who yelled at their children. I knew that my neighbors (all officer's wives) did not approve, and we lived in a close community, where my failure to refrain from yelling was immediately obvious. I was fairly bright and intelligent. Why couldn't I get rid of this character flaw? Why couldn't I be perfect?

The effort was doomed to failure, as are all our efforts to achieve perfection. Accepting our imperfections and aspiring instead to good enough status allows us to succeed in our efforts.

This is parallel to William Ellery Channing's work when he elucidated the principles of Unitarianism in 1842. Channing redefined the nature of Jesus. Instead of a God, lifted far above humankind, he gave us an understanding of a human Jesus. Channing's Jesus was a prophet, a teacher, a healer, a companion at table. He did great and good things with and for people. Because he did not share the perfection of God as God was then understood, but rather shared in our humanity, people could aspire to be like Jesus. Ordinary men and women could learn to heal, could teach great moral and ethical lessons, and could act prophetically. They could aspire to be like Jesus.

If we remove the requirement that parents, women and men, need to be perfect to be effective; if we give them the Good Enough model to which they can aspire, they can be effective at parenting.

3

And what is true now for us, for you and you and you, can be extrapolated back in time. It was also good enough for your parents.

Just as we are not perfect parents, we can release our parents from our wish that they had been perfect. I think I had some of the best parents I know of—but they weren't perfect. My mother's temper flashed at times. She was guilty of screaming at one of her five children. When her heart damage surfaced and she became a semi-invalid, my father made it clear that she was not to be upset under any circumstances. This made it difficult for my teen-aged siblings to navigate the storms of adolescence. My parents weren't perfect, but they were certainly Good Enough. Maybe better than Good Enough....

We tend to hug the hurts of childhood close to us into our adult lives. I suggest that it is time to let them go. If you can see your parents, not as perfect, but as Good Enough, you can let go of resentments carried since childhood. If you can say that your parents loved you, that they did their best to care for you, and that they let you go when you reached adulthood, then they were Good Enough parents. Forgive them their lack of perfection. Forgive yourself your own lack of perfection. And teach your children the virtue of forgiveness.

May we go forth on this lovely Mother's Day, celebrating the Good Enough Mother and her partner in parenting.

Shalom and Saalat.
Blessed Be and Amen.