

GIFTS FROM MY CHILDREN

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I will soon unpack our holiday decorations and among them will be those all made with eager hands by our children over the years. My sweet husband and I will once again place them among the other seasonal trimmings. Many times memories win over practicality. There is the clothespin reindeer, the toilet paper roll Santa and the construction paper tree with the 'stained glass' waxed paper center. The kitchen towels, bubble bath and socks that seem to be the mainstream of their gift giving ideas have all past on to greater glory down the drain or simply worn away with time.

Aside from all the glued and painted ornaments that have a strange hold in my memory and in my heart, the gifts that I hold dearest are the ones wrapped warmly in the dispositions and personalities of my own children. These gifts are priceless and reach into places not seen but only felt, not touched but experienced. These are the gifts that our children bring with them when they are born. Each one of my children possesses such a gift and fortunate am I to be the receiver.

While the holiday season tends to overflow with activities and commitments, my wish is that you may find time to reflect on the gifts brought into your lives by your own children. As I have journeyed with each of my children they have exposed the best and worst of my most inner self. They have provided me with every reason to wrestle with my own deficiencies as a parent and imperfections as a mortal and work to become better than I could ever hope to be. I am a better person because of my children. The personal insight and wisdom, although still short of the mark, is because of the relationship I have with my children.

In my imagination, I believe that before birth, amidst a great gathering each child chooses who will best serve as his or her mother. The gifts my children have brought to me, embodied within their unique temperaments, have provided life lessons that continue to shape me as a mother and human being.

Michael came first and frankly I was inexperienced and naive. Mike's birth was difficult; well past his due date, and a fight getting him 'down the chute' so to speak. From early on I sensed a level of uncertainty about him. He was colicky and didn't want to gain weight. His struggles in school did not clinically reveal themselves until his junior year. We often cried together. Many times I didn't know what to do. There were times I stopped returning calls from yet another frustrated teacher. It's funny (sort of), but this is the same kid that eventually tested borderline gifted and talented. With a few modifications (and special lenses to help his eyes 'team') Mike ended up doing quite well. But it was tough. Mike gave me the gift of UNCONDITIONAL LOVE. When he graduated from high school I sat in the school bleachers and wept in my sister's arms. He is 27 and serves in the Air Force.

Andrew came roaring into this life and ready for just about anything. Even now when he makes up his mind there really isn't much you can do except run along side of him shouting advice along the way. He will not slow down until he trips over his own feet, runs into something, or loses his wallet. He is goal oriented, decisive and has a healthy sense of risk taking. The athlete from day one (try changing diapers on a kid that scoots, twists, turns, juts and rolls every which way), he is a team player and motivator. So many times as he was growing up I heard, "Mom, I just want to do this. Just let me try."

Because of Andrew I began to listen with my heart, not just my ears. Andrew gave me the gift of TRUST. After trying to seek his fortune within the first few years of high school graduation he has decided to give college a try. He lives in California.

Ricky: Ricky died in 1992 at age 19. It was the greatest tragedy that I have ever had to deal with. Ricky had recently moved back to Michigan to be near his mother. His maternal grandmother had been diagnosed with cancer and he felt that he should be closer. Ricky had lived with us for a few years where he developed an especially close relationship with our sons. In that time we also experienced what many describe as ‘those difficult teen years’. In those last months I discovered a young man who was quietly coming to terms with life’s challenges and difficulties. He was going to make it and all would eventually be well. Over the years I have found my PEACE with our then rocky relationship. Had he lived we would have made our own PEACE together. I value time differently now. I am more aware of what I turn myself over to with worry and fretting, although I still do quite a bit of that. Some things we have no control over. We must be reassured that with perseverance and patience, these moments in time eventually sort themselves out, or a way is provided so that our efforts become meaningful and make a difference. Ricky gave me the gift of PEACE.

I was 42 when our daughter Cora was born. From the beginning she endowed us with vitality that had vanished with Ricky’s death. Mike and Andrew were enthralled by her presence and by her ‘girly-ness’, something they were unaccustomed to. Even her daddy had to do some readjusting. Cora has provided our home with an unexpected sweetness. Now in our mid-50’s my husband and I have yet to attain the revered title of ‘empty nester’ like many of our friends. Rather, we attend volleyball and basketball games, mother-daughter and daddy-daughter activities, school conferences and of course--- the Mall. Any thought of retirement has been put on the back burner and will most likely stay there for quite some time. Cora has given me the gift of LAUGHTER. Not the giggly type. No. It’s the ‘come up from your toes, race along your spine, and spill from the gut’ kind. She is quick witted, as well as gentle and compassionate. Cora is now 12 and attends middle school.

Our children are with us for a short time. Childhood is short. Adult hood is so much longer and filled with challenges and joy. Our children present to us many gifts in addition to unconditional love, trust, peace and many, many reasons to laugh...and cry. They wish for us to be there for them and hold their hands as long as needed until they can venture out on their own and take up their own causes and lives. Memories that are created within family experiences fuse themselves into our hearts and minds forever. In those memories lies the wisdom that makes us better mothers, fathers, and human beings.

“There is real value in simply being present, for our children. For when we claim the realm of motherhood, we also protect and honor the province of childhood.”

Katrina Kenison from MITTEN STRINGS FOR GOD: REFLECTIONS FOR MOTHERS IN A HURRY

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