

Mother Nurture

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The Real Gift of Parenting

Last year, the holidays were crazy! I seemed to spend most of my time standing in line or carrying bags. We spent a small fortune on assorted complicated gizmos -- which got opened and then ignored as my daughter and son spent most of the day playing with \$2.99 worth of stickers. We got stressed out in order to relax and suffered in order to have fun. My husband and I stared at each other across the the flotsam and jetsam of wrapping paper and various pieces of who-knows-what, and you could see the look in each of our eyes: Say what?!

As we brave the holiday shopping crowds -- trying to decide whether to give Barney or Big Bird, action figures or dolls -- one can wonder about the true gifts of parenting.

We think that the true gifts of parenting go deeper than giving our children toys and games -- or even a college education.

Over and over again, a hundred times each day, we make a more fundamental kind of “gift” to our children. We give a hug, a smile, a touch, a scolding, a sandwich, a paycheck earned, a story read, a bed tucked in, a goodnight kiss.

We give the gift of letting something slide, of taking a no-nap, hungry day into account. We give the gift of restraint, of not swatting or yelling or overreacting.

We offer our lap when our back hurts, we offer our heart when it feels empty. We let our children enter our thoughts when our minds seem stuffed with grown-up concerns and plans.

We let our children have us when we feel all too “had” by others. We give even when others haven’t given enough to us: our coworkers, our boss, our spouse, our own parents. We give even when a part of ourselves may not want to; often the most meaningful giving to our children is offered when our personal preference would be to do something else.

We find more water when the wellspring seems to have run dry.

Most fundamentally, we give our *selves*. We open the door wide; we give our children access to the vulnerable places in our heart; we let them enter our souls; we let them crawl oh so deeply under our skin.

Our children give us so much to be sure. The act of parenting has its own rewards. And we need to take care of ourselves so that we can continue to have something to give to our children.

But parents don't give to get. And in the moment of giving to a child we often don't get back much at all. Fundamentally, parenting is not an exchange: we are not playing let's-make-a-deal with our children.

Parenting is an ongoing process of sacrifice: the sacrifice of attention, time, energy, money, personal agendas, and all the activities we would prefer to do if we were not parenting.

Of course, we sacrifice not as martyrs but with our eyes open, freely, with strength, with all the ordinary little heroic acts that make up the daily life of a parent.

We sacrifice our individual selves into relationship with our children. We release for a moment the sense of contraction as an isolated self into the joining of love, a love that can feel ultimately Divine.

Sacrifice means "sacred act." During the next month or so of holidays -- whose origins are deeply spiritual -- it can be a good time to dwell on the sacred essence of parenting.

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This column is offered freely to parent-related organizations. If you know of another newsletter that might like to carry it besides the one in which you are reading it now, please encourage that organization to contact Rick Hanson at the email address below. Or just email Rick with the contact info and he will approach the organization.

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