

to have me back in a fuller capacity. Two years later Luke was born, a happy, healthy baby. What a relief.

My house has been emptying over the years, as children go to university and work. It hasn't been easy, but I look at my children now and see five happy young adults all doing well in their chosen fields. They are so much fun when they are all together, laughing, debating, not always agreeing, but respecting one another's differences.

Motherhood ... the state of being a mother. I don't regret it for a moment. Hard work, but the results are rewarding and absolutely priceless.

Wendy Joan Oates
Hamilton

My life as a mother

My story begins sadly and ends happily. It is also true.

It's 1993 and I'm twelve weeks from giving birth to my son. My daughter, just twelve years old, is standing beside me, watching her father walk out the door to be with someone else. I remember all the questions that had to be answered.

The next two weeks seemed to be a blur. I coasted from one day to the next, not knowing how I would get through each day. The pain and stress of it all finally took its toll when I started going into premature labour. I managed to drive myself to the hospital 20 minutes from my home. I was examined and rushed by ambulance to Waikato Hospital, where the doctors told me they would have to take him out because of the stress he was experiencing. My heart fell to my feet, and for the first time in my life I knew what it felt like to be really helpless. There was nothing I could do for my son but pray to God for his survival.

On 30 August 1993 my son decided to arrive, just 1500gms and 10 weeks early. I couldn't believe that he was here and how it all came about. Shannon was in the newborn unit for three weeks, and I remained by his side with his sister and my family

until I was able to take him home. Right from the beginning, he was a little fighter who grew stronger every day.

Nine years later and with all the pain and tears I went through, he has been my little rock. The love I've had from my children has been my medicine, and it's been the best medicine any mother could ever hope for. They are so loving and caring and I am proud to be their mum. Shannon is a happy healthy boy who goes off to school with a kiss and cuddle. He is always letting me know that he loves me, and his sister has been my best friend through it all. She is now a graphic art design student and I am very proud of the young woman that she has become.

Being a mother is the most rewarding experience that life can bring. Without my two children, life would have no meaning. I thank God for them every day.

Angela Marr
Tauranga

No holidays for Mum

Being a mother is a job for life. You can't resign from it, and few of us get fired from it. We all say it, we all know it, and yet the way we fill in the job description differs from woman to woman, from culture to culture. It often saddens me that debates that should free women to discuss their choices in a harmonious and supportive environment, often become a battleground in a polarised struggle between the women that 'do' and the women that 'don't'. Do and don't ... what? Work, stay at home? Prioritise the needs of their children over the needs of their bosses, or vice versa?

I don't believe there is a 'best way', but what I do believe is that we need to support rather than fight each other, and allow each mother the freedom to decide on a mix of responsibilities that suits her particular style and temperament. So this is not an article about 'the best way' to be a mother, far from it. My own personal obsession with motherhood, and all it entails, stems from the fact that, for me, achieving the status of motherhood was a

hard struggle. Out of six pregnancies, the one that survived is Karl, now almost nine. Although I don't believe that because he didn't come 'to order' he is loved any more than children that have come along without a hitch, I do believe that I covet the prize of motherhood more than I might have done if my journey had been less complicated. So I can sometimes get 'carried away' with mothering, something that happened during a recent extended working holiday abroad, and led me to revisit some of the choices that I made around my way of being a mother.

For me, motherhood comes before 'careerhood', but not necessarily before 'me-hood'. My choices have led me to structure a life that enables me to prioritise my job as a mother, alongside a life as a writer, a counsellor and a teacher, not stressing from one to the other, but also finding the time to sit quietly with a newspaper and a cup of coffee in the middle of the day, or taking the dogs out for a long meditative walk in the woods. Until recently, I smugly thought I'd accomplished the ideal, and perhaps for a while I had, so imagine my shock and horror when, a few weeks ago, on the beautiful island of Fiji, I found myself in tears, sobbing at the lot of being a mother. Feeling the archetypal martyr, victimised and taken for granted. Feeling that I was 'always' putting myself last, and the family first ... the very trap I had seen my own wonderful mother fall into, and had vowed never to fall into myself. Given that every holiday needs to have its low point, and that sometimes we all end up feeling sorry for ourselves, there was something here that I needed to look at.

Time to re-evaluate my choices, and look at where I was going wrong. The particular brand of mothering that I feared I had slipped into was something more akin to the matriarchal linchpin, the family manager or spider in the web than the freelancer juggling all her roles with ease. In an instance I had gone from smugly believing that I had hit the perfect balance between mothering and 'me-ing', to feeling old, grown up, burdened with responsibilities and an unsustainable parental workload. Though angry at 'the boys' for taking me for granted, the tears were much more about the realisation that I was in a trap of my own making. I just felt totally incapable of shedding this huge sense of being

responsible for their happiness, rather than my own. Ugh! 'How did I get here?' I asked myself between hiccups. Had I become such an icon of female virtue that, just like my mother, I unquestioningly and automatically met the needs of my loved ones before my own, considering it my job, and as such, wanting to do the job to my best abilities?

Although, in principle, there is nothing wrong with wanting the best for our loved ones, something is wrong when spontaneous love and generosity turn into resentment and a sense of martyrdom. The practical things, such as clean clothes, forgotten towels, mislaid goggles, although trivial, are still a vital part of keeping the firm running. But they can be managed and delegated. What's that, delegated? The very word 'delegate' implies that someone is 'in charge' and doing the delegating. Someone has the overview, someone has one track of her brain constantly switched on to what others need. And that someone was me, the whole holiday, through nineteen different sessions of packing and unpacking suitcases, and it was just getting to be too much. A little voice in my head said over and over again, 'Aren't I supposed to be on holiday too?'

I suddenly remember my mother's words: 'Mothers don't have holidays.' How I scorned her then, while at the same time selfishly lapping up her willingness to put her own needs second to my own. Yet when I lost her at the age of 28, far too young to be motherless, I missed her, and realised her value more deeply than I can ever describe, as if an artery had been severed for ever. 'Mothers don't have holidays'...it rang hollowly in my head, and I answered the voice from long ago ... 'They can, if they remove themselves from the scene and leave the boys to get on with it.' The problem with that tactic is that it becomes a very lonely pursuit of relaxation. What I craved was to be able to be 'off the job', despite having the two best men in my life right there by my side. Not being referred to for every decision regarding activities and permissions, not even having to delegate these responsibilities, but just having someone else in charge. Why can my husband shut himself off from the world around him and lose himself in a book, while I have half a mind alert to whether Karl was floating out to sea, disturbing the other bathers or needing

more sunscreen. I couldn't switch off, and I blamed my husband for it, as well as hating myself for it.

When Karl was still a baby, and my husband showed himself more than willing to muck in and lighten the load, I realised that as long as I hovered around in the background, I would be a constant point of reference. It was my own fault. I had coimjréffed the unforgivable new mother's sin of thinking I had to teach my man how to take care of Karl the best way, i.e. 'my' way, undermining any sense of responsibility or personal incentive he may have had. As long as I withdrew from the two men I loved more than anything else in my life, I could ensure some measure of 'holiday' for myself. But with the three of us at such close quarters, lounging around on deckchairs or eating in a restaurant, I remain the first point of call whenever any domestic issue needs to be resolved. Why am I complaining? After all, I engineered it that way.

A two-year-old demands and deserves constant attention from its caregiver, if only to stop the little mite from putting its fingers in sockets and climbing off balconies. But rather than just accident prevention, I have valued the time spent with Karl, from age two and upwards, in discussions about life, God, girls ... answering his questions as best I can, or going on the internet together to find answers to questions that I can't help him with. Just being there, sometimes in the background, enabling him to develop social skills, having friends home after school, playing judo, swimming, cycling or just sitting companionably side by side on the sofa watching Pokemon 3. These are all activities that I have done with love, with dedication, because they contributed to my son's growth and well-being, and developed his sense of feeling good about himself, that he mattered.

I still want to do those things, and I still believe they matter, but as much as I didn't think I was 'slaving' around my son, I have to be honest and realise that I wouldn't be having an attack of 'oh poor me, the mother-martyr', if there wasn't something of that going on. I realise that in trying to make myself indispensable, or believing myself to be, I have to pay the price for it, whether I'm trying to be the indispensable mother, or the indispensable executive at work. It's a power trip. 'Ask me, no one else knows as well as I do.' It hurts to realise that I've had something of it going

on, and it's not the image of motherhood I had in mind for myself, nor can it be doing Karl any good either.

By the time I sort out my feelings into what I am now writing down, Karl is back at school and my husband is back at work. I have space to find myself again, within the time allocated around my non-mothering tasks. And maybe my mother was right after all. Maybe a mother's holiday starts when everyone else's ends. Maybe travelling halfway around the world for two months could have led to much greater conflicts than just this one attack of misery on a Fijian beach. But the exaggerated intimacy also served to show me that I do have some adjustments to make. Not to try to be the best mother in the world, meeting everyone's needs before they even know they have them. Making myself indispensable because it makes me feel important. But meeting my own needs, not just in 'down time' when Karl is at school and my husband at work, but actually daring sometimes to inconvenience them and make them wait. Surely that is also a valuable lesson to teach my son. A little bit of selfishness, mixed in with a little bit of selflessness, goes a long way, and it won't make me any less of a loving mother. Less perfect maybe, hurrah, but not less loving.

Lysanne
Parnell, Auckland

Power

My most scary moment as a mother occurred when my eldest son was eight or nine years old. I don't know what triggered it, but suddenly the thought was in my mind: 'It's in my power to destroy this child's life if I so choose.'

It made me stop and think. What was I building into my child's life? If I was planting criticism, discouragement, nagging, put-downs, I could destroy him. So I consciously determined to build into his life encouragement, creativity, praise and honesty, to be a positive role model and to build him up rather than pull him down.