



Roxana Villa

Raising Children, Growing Ourselves

How We Nurture All Children of God

BY DEE DEE RISHER

The experience of raising a child utterly changes one's life. The myriad ways children reshape our lives and define our choices have spiritual, economic, cultural and political dimensions. Ultimately, the choices we make for children—our own and particularly the children of others—reveal the true spirit of our society and determine whether we build communities of compassion. For most women who become mothers, the spiritual question of how we balance our own yearnings and vocation with these new lives—more demanding than we ever would have imagined—is fundamental.

I fit one profile of the “new mother.” I had both my children after I turned 40. By that time, I had established a strong professional identity as a writer and magazine editor. This late timing was determined less by career pragmatics than personal circumstances, but the effect was the same. I am accustomed to some outlet for my gifts and skills that is external to our household and immediate neighborhood. When my children came, I began uncovering what I was like as a mom, but I never wanted to lose all those other parts of me. Somehow I

intuited that for me, being a good mom depended on keeping all the different aspects of who I was nurtured. How to do that, however, was not an easy question.

The cultural “mommy wars”—a tired back and forth of whether women should “work” or “stay home with their kids”—make me sick. They reinforce a stale dichotomy that I, a teenager in the seventies, have lived my entire life. On either side, the liberal and conservative voices square off, debating the fate of children as women are released from circumscribed roles in childrearing. The arguments are predictable and hardly bear repeating here. Conservatives think that nothing can take the place of a woman as an anchor in the home, and a source of stability and constant nurture for kids who are otherwise flung into the uncaring hands of strangers. Liberals think that the government should supply generous parental leave, universal child care, and after-school care so that women are able to raise children yet be liberated from their households to pursue fulfilling careers.

Increasingly, parents don't relate. Most parents I know understand that roles are shifting, and are actively working this new reality out in their lives in creative and

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disparate ways. Dads do more household work and parenting. I don't even know a “stay-at-home mom.” Almost all the parents I know, moms or dads, also do some work from home—in odd hours, at night and during naps.

This tired and inaccurate debate also has definite class and race boundaries. As the African American friends in my life point out, women of color do not struggle over whether to get a job. That question is almost exclusively the angst of white women of privilege. Sydney Trent, a magazine editor in a mixed-race marriage, comments: “Living as I do between cultures . . . I'm privy to it all. My white friends agonize with me over whether their work is damaging their children. My black friends almost never do. As a working mother, I often feel judged by whites and rarely by blacks.”

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There is no question, however, that even in the most egalitarian partnerships, women still often end up worrying about, managing or doing disproportionate amounts of home coordination and child care. In the scores of relationships I know on a fairly intimate basis, I can name only two in which this is not the case, where the male member of the

couple is truly the primary parent or a completely equal co-parent.

I am still waiting to meet the 20-something unmarried male who is actively grappling with how to balance having children with his career (as his female counterparts commonly do). Shifts in societal consciousness take generations.

Choosing Outside the Dichotomy

Thanks to the insights and real struggle of many women (and some men) who preceded me, my spouse and I have had many options in our ongoing attempts to balance work and family. With my children now only five and seven, we have already experimented with a range of models.

For several years after our first child, my spouse was the primary caregiver while I brought home the paycheck and health care. After the second child, we began sharing one full-time position, both home half-days and working half-days. (The fact that we are both editors made this convenient.) Except for the sometimes-excruciating transition from baby timelessness to work time, this was in many ways the best and more balanced experiment we had. When that workplace closed entirely, we both started working part-time at different jobs. Even for our household, which habitually lives very simply, this quickly became completely unsustainable. The jump in health care costs made it impossible to live on our income.

Now, for the first time in our marriage, we have the more traditional arrangement, where my spouse works full time as the primary breadwinner and I am at home. While my children are at preschool and school, I am a freelance writer, editor and poet. After school, I am the homefront coordinator—cook, laundress, master gardener, treehouse engineer, maid, school and doctor liaison, and overseer of play dates.

Our ability to experiment with such different models is both a class and a political privilege. We have white-collar professions that lend themselves to flextime and working from home. In addition, we have worked for organizations that pride themselves on supporting minorities, women and liberation—small nonprofits that were very willing to work with us, and understood our need to both have professional identities and our desire to be at home with our kids. I also believe that the fact that we were older and more-established workers when our children came allowed our employers to continue to invest in us.

One of the true benefits of our several years of job-sharing is that we never argue about which role is easier. Neither one of us asks, when we come home to chaotic supper preparations and a topsy-turvy house, “What did you do all day?” We both agree that having a job at the office—where you have the possibility of experiencing sustained concentration and linear thought

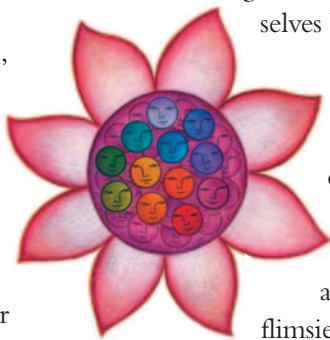
patterns without interruption—is, hands-down, the cushy position. It is controllable, fulfilling and rewarding. Give us a 200-page writing project over a two-year-old's tantrum any day.

Working Around Obstacles

Despite these factors, which created a favorable climate for experimentation, we have encountered systemic problems that we could not solve, and which reshaped our choices. Most intransigent has been the issue of health care. All the healthcare companies of our different employers were alike in that they set a minimum number of hours employees must work to receive full coverage. Normally this was at least 32 hours per week. Employees who worked less paid one to three times more for the same health coverage, if it was even available. When my husband worked part-time, he paid \$600 a month for healthcare coverage for our family. Had he been full-time, we would have had a more comfortable salary—and paid only \$200 per month for the same health care. Very few workplaces prorate salary and benefits so that part-timers earn the same equivalent per hour as full-timers. This was the critical obstacle that made us discontinue our attempts to share home responsibilities while both working part-time, though that is the model we both prefer.

We chose to stay home with our children in their preschool years. Yet, we had also done the math and realized that the hidden costs of a second job rapidly erode its benefits.

It is rather off-putting to realize that the paycheck for the second job largely goes to pay for the additional needs the second job creates—child care, transportation, more prepared food, more help with chores, and the myriad mental-health indulgences we have to give ourselves because of stress.



We quickly discovered that the informal network of childcare coverage our parents used regularly—neighbors, friends and relatives—was much flimsier in this age of scheduled kids. At one point, we explored Head Start, the government-supported program for preschool children. Several excellent programs in our area admitted a range of income levels as a way to combat class segregation. The year our workplace closed, we qualified. The next year, federal cuts in the program went into effect and I got a surreptitious phone call from a friendly Head Start teacher. He told me that if I would just write a letter saying that my husband gave me only \$600/month for the family, my income would qualify for the program. When I pointed out that this would be lying, the teacher replied that the cuts had forced many parents into playing such games. (Who, after all, can raise a family of four in a major urban area on a household income of \$600 a month and not live in a shelter or on the streets?)

I hung up the phone, shaken by a program that would put parents in such a position. An explicit goal of Head Start is to help working parents get better jobs and income while providing first-rate childcare. Yet because of slashes to the program, Head Start can force parents

to make a difficult choice—stay at home because they can't afford child care, or lie to the system because, if they do find work, they often no longer qualify for the subsidized, quality child care that makes their employment possible.

Enjoying Parenting and Life

I dream of a culture in which creating societal supports for parents is seen as a moral choice for the common good. I live for the day when the question of raising children is no longer framed as a “women's issue.”

One clear move would be to begin to allow men parental leave and more flexibility in their work schedules. This would acknowledge the fact that men's roles in child rearing are changing and will continue to change. According to the United States Census Bureau, nearly one in four fathers in two-earner families provides child care while the mother is at work, and nearly one in five is primary caregiver. Children in dual-earner families usually experience no slip in parental attention, but that attention is more balanced between parents.

While the media discuss women “opting out” of the work world, most women do not see it that way. Many see their intentional moves as ways to balance their lives and move toward joy. The parents I know do not want to be relieved of our duties toward our children. We cherish our time with them, and we want to be there to watch them grow. More state-supported child care would not solve our dilemmas.

Ultimately, I believe continuing to debate working mothers does not serve us because the world is facing very different challenges that this debate ignores entirely. We live in a

world that is in crises of materialism, wealth disparity and ecological devastation. In this age, choices about economies of work and home are much more complex than the public debate around working parents either acknowledging or accommodates.

For me, raising children has been one more sphere in which I try to release myself from the economic engine to which middle-class, well-educated high-achievers like myself are particularly susceptible. While the culture might love to frame the debate in terms of the “mommy wars,” I believe we have an entire subgroup of people who see where the economic train is going, and who are no longer mindlessly loyal to that vision. We want sane, 40-hour work cultures, not endless traveling and 80-hour weeks. We want to work for good in the world, but also to have lives that are vital outside of work. We want to balance our professional gifts with time to watch our children grow and to build our communities—time to be prayerful children of God.

We have grasped the great irony of the classic story that Indian priest Anthony de Mello tells of two fishermen. One is sleeping on the beach in the sun when another, more prosperous fisherman chides him. “Why aren’t you out fishing?”

“I’ve caught what I need for the day,” the first fisherman retorts.

“But you could catch more fish and sell them. Then you could buy bigger boats and hire other workers—and catch even more.”

“Then what?”

“Well, you could become rich and retire and do what you want—really enjoy life.”

The first fisherman sighs deeply. “Well, what do you think I’m doing now?”

God Calls Us to Balance


The lives our culture offers as models of success are pressured, work-dominated and very consumptive. The working professionals in many dual-wage households depend on an entire echelon of low-wage, often nonwhite, workers who get no health care or benefits. These workers prepare convenience foods and take-out. They trim lawns, clean houses, mind and sometimes chauffeur children, do laundry and dry cleaning, grow our food (often in other countries), slaughter our meat and harvest our fields. Part of my resistance to many conventional “careers” is the conviction that many such tracks work to reinforce the widening class disparities of our culture.

The other part is rooted in the conviction that we need to adopt radically different lifestyles in order to continue to exist as a species. Many of us are very aware of the looming environmental crisis that will reshape the remainder of our lives and drastically affect the lives of our children—provided we survive it at all. Global warming will demand vast lifestyle changes. Addressing it requires re-evaluating cultural norms in major and significant ways. We will simply have to live more sustainably. At a minimum, that will include more recycling, reusing, energy conservation, gardening, cooking from basics and cutting down or eliminating fossil fuel use. These are time-consuming disciplines a work-driven culture is ill-equipped to accommodate.

Often children become the gift that also forces us to re-evaluate

our lives and clarify our deepest values. Every parent has his or her own story of trying to strike the right balance within those values. We confront a multitude of compromises and trade-offs. The questions are always shifting. Our gift to each other could be this: to offer one another the grace of supporting each hard-won answer, no matter how different one parent’s choices are from our own.

I believe that the fact that women and men are making different parenting choices is slowly altering the face of the United States workplace to allow working parents more possibilities. At this point, the answers are still very imperfect and the structural obstacles are significant. The entire shift is also happening within the context of even broader cultural challenges, which will demand greater changes.

There is no doubt that I have lived in a very different age than did my mother—one that has offered me more dimensions in which to live out my call as a child of God. As I look into the expectant and hopeful eyes of my five-year-old daughter, what I most want to give her is the courage and confidence to live into *whatever* God’s call on her life demands. As I see it, our task as parents is to remove the race, class and social boundaries that limit all children of God from growing and exercising their gifts. And if that is truly our work, we will certainly spend our lives on it! Let us get started. 

Dee Dee Risher is a writer, editor and Christian living in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her two children, Luke and Thea, are much better off for the fact that she has shared their parenting with William O’Brien.