

mothers who think

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when I was a young girl in Calcutta, someone took me to see a performance by Ravi Shankar. He was already a famous musician then and although I can't recall the exact details of the concert, I can still feel the enchantment created by the notes of his sitar. But what I remember most vividly is this: After the concert, when large crowds of admirers were milling around the maestro, a girl about my age ran up onto the stage and threw her arms around him. He sat her on his lap, and for a moment the two had a private whispered conversation that ended in laughter.

"It's his daughter," whispered someone behind me.
"Lucky girl!"

I couldn't have agreed more. For days after the concert I fantasized that I was her, the lucky daughter of a famous father, lucky because she was especially loved by a man thousands of people adored. But now that I'm a parent who has had a few modest brushes with fame myself, I realize that I'd got it all wrong. It wasn't the daughter who was lucky because she had a famous father. It was the father who was the lucky one -- because he had her.

I won't pretend that the taste of fame isn't sweet. It is. Very. But after a successful event in a crowded auditorium, after all the applause and handshakes and awards, there's something special about coming home to two little people who know me only as Mama. Who climb onto my lap and go through my purse to see if I've brought home a treat. Who think that a trophy is a special toy ("Mama, can we play with your little golden man?"). Who require that a dirty diaper be changed right now, and demand a bedtime story afterwards. Who wake up in the middle of the night terrified by

monsters they've dreamed, and crawl into my bed and fall asleep with their faces pressed into my neck. Who couldn't care less about prestigious book reviews. Who don't know about bestseller lists and whether I've made it onto them, but know something more important: that sometimes mamas need hugs because they're sad. Who think that the best part of my books are the back flaps because that's where my photo is. "Mama," they shriek delightedly, having rummaged through the rest of the pages to find it. And then they bestow great slobbery kisses on it.

My children and I share a special, singular space where fame and ego and their attendant worries do not exist. I can't imagine such a relationship with any adult, not even my husband, Murthy, in spite of the love we share. He knows too much of my other selves and what they have achieved. If he didn't acknowledge them, I would be hurt, angry. I'd accuse him of taking me for granted. However subtly, my successes outside the home have changed our relationship within it. Perhaps this will happen with my children, too, as they grow older and become more aware of the larger world. But for now I cherish their confident belief that I am theirs, wholly, to do with as they will. That my best -- no, my only -- job is being their mother.

They're not completely wrong.

Some time back, I was nominated for a prestigious award in the San Francisco Bay area, the Woman of Achievement award. I was very excited -- just being nominated was a great honor. The winners would be announced at a huge banquet at the Fairmont Hotel, a fancy affair. I bought a new outfit for the event. I even went on a diet. In the weeks leading up to the special night, from time to time I allowed myself to fantasize about walking up to the stage, thin, gorgeous, eloquent, to accept the award. Then I'd shake my head and laugh at myself. I knew how tough the competition was. On the afternoon of the award ceremony, Anand, my eldest, who was 3 then, came down with the stomach flu. He had a bad case: chills, then fever and diarrhea. In between, he'd throw up.

I was not a model mother. Once I'd consulted with the doctor and got over my initial fright, I was dreadfully upset. Why should this happen to me, on this day of all days, I said to myself. I didn't deserve it. As I changed diapers and carried away soiled bedclothes, I thought back enviously on my B.C. (Before Children) years, their delightful, airy lack of responsibility. Maybe what one of my friends had said was true, after all: My life had entered its A.D. phase. All Downhill.

"Go to the banquet," said Murthy, who knew how disappointed I was. "I'll take care of Anand. He'll be OK."

But of course I couldn't. I knew I'd just spend the whole evening worrying and feeling guilty, running to the phone every few minutes to call home. Besides, there was something curiously cleansing -- like the bitter neem sticks people chew in India to purify the blood -- about holding my son's head as he threw up, or wiping his face with a wet cloth, or trying to distract him from his stomach ache with a story.

Late in the evening, when Anand, who was a little better, had fallen into a doze, the phone rang. It was one of my friends. "They just announced the winners!" she yelled. "You're one of them!"

I felt a strange mix of elation and disappointment, so strong that for a moment I couldn't speak. I was afraid I'd start crying. Then I heard Anand calling from the other room: "Mama, I'm thirsty."

I thanked my friend and hung up, then brought my son a cool glass of 7-Up. He took a sip and looked at me, his eyes still a little glazed with fever. "Mama," he said, "I'm really glad you're here. Can I snuggle with you?"

I lay down next to him and held him. His forehead was hot against my cheek. Against my chest I could feel his heart beating -- a little too fast, like a frightened bird's. And suddenly they didn't seem so important, all those things I'd craved and would no doubt crave again: praise and cheers, flashing cameras, my moment in the limelight.

"I'm really glad I'm here too, sweetheart," I said. And meant every word.

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