

Learning to live in a circle of love

By Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt
Guest contributor

My name is Woman. I am called Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt. I am named for my paternal grandmother. I express who I am in many roles.

I am a daughter of Anna and Jacob Muschal, who created a family founded on love for self, others and God. They birthed three children: Carolyn, Michael and me. To this day, each believes that "I am the favorite." Our parents insisted that we use our God-given talents and develop skills to be interdependent people.

When I was a young girl and teachers and others asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I always answered, "I want to be a teacher, mother and wife," in that order. The Sisters of Mercy at Cathedral High School in Trenton, N.J., wanted me to reverse the second and third choices. In high school, when we studied "Hamlet," I read: "To thine own self be true/and it shall follow/as the night the day,/thou canst not then be false to any man." I made a promise, a fundamental option, to live my life being true to myself.

I began teaching religion at age 14 to young people, and have continued being a religious educator to this date. My desire to be a teacher also led me to Rider College for a bachelor's degree in business education.

There I met Alfred Reinhardt, and on July 30, 1955, we publicly vowed we would be husband and wife to each other. As we approach our 35th anniversary, we love each other's company, still work daily at our relationship, and giggle at a reality best described by a saying on a plaque in our home: "That you and I could live our lives at the same time on earth — How incredible God's plan."

Our love burst forth with the births of four

children: Alfred, Erika, Kurt and Michael. We have been parents for 122 years, the sum total of the ages of our children.

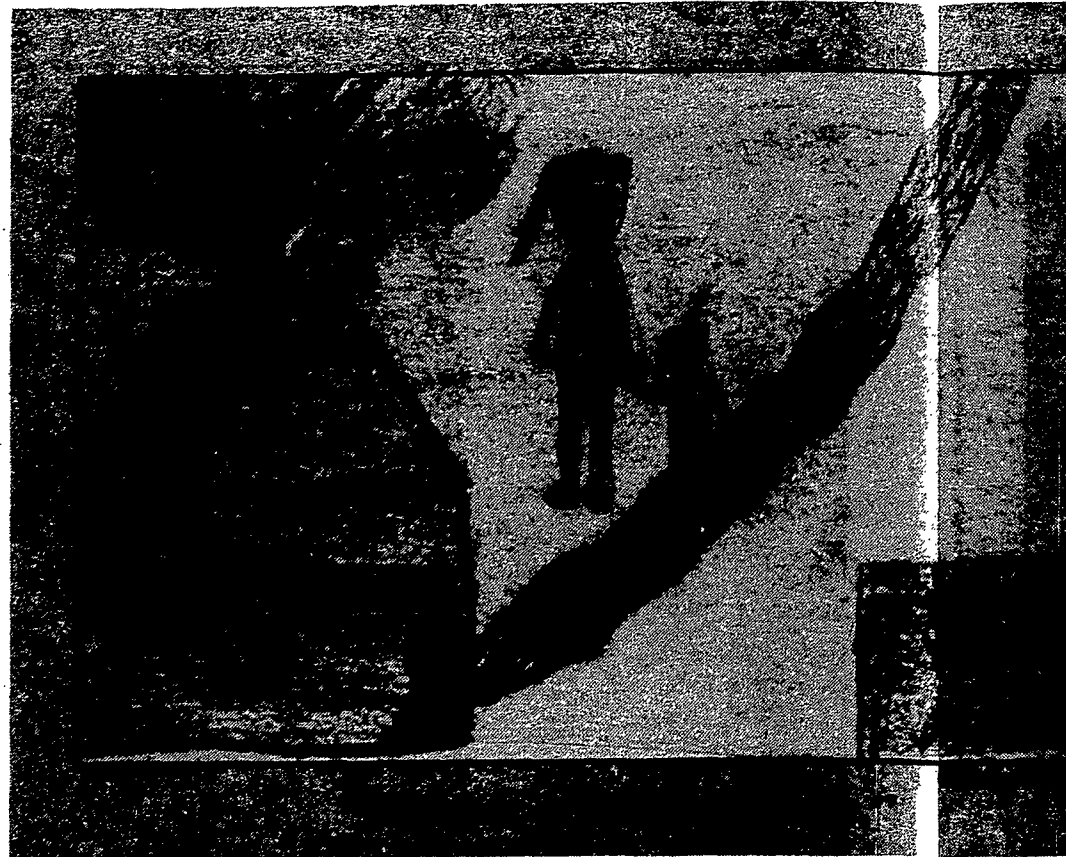
By the age of 28, I had what I desired. I was a teacher, a mother of three, and a wife with Al. What I could not understand is that I felt there was "more." One day, sitting at our kitchen table, I asked myself "Who am I?" I took a crayon and drew a flower. In the center, I wrote my name, which represented my self. I drew petals representing the many roles I need to express my self. For the past 28 years, this image of a flower has been a symbol to help me know who I am as I continue to grow into my whole/holy woman person.

Today I know that all I can be when I grow up is myself. I am a daughter of God, and I have always known that God loved me and that I loved God.

This relationship with God connected more when I was pregnant with our first-born child, Alfred. I was awed that Al and I were co-creating with God this new life. That same awe and ecstasy were there each time I was pregnant, mixed with morning sickness, heartburn, fatigue and varicose veins. I learned that birthing is a both/and experience: both exciting and frightening, energizing and exhausting.

As I grew to understand my role as mother, my relationship with God became still more connected. Freedom is an essential feature of that relationship, which means that God loves me as I am, no strings attached, that I have dignity and worth as a person because I am created in the image and likeness of God. This is also what I experienced in my childhood home.

Al and I wondered how we could translate this to our children. A friend gave us a statue of a bird with one wing rooted and one wing flying freely — a model for our efforts to provide our children with



both roots and wings. What better roots than the great commandment to love God, and love others as they loved themselves? Yet learning to love oneself is most difficult. No matter how parents love their children, they must find self-worth in themselves.

Each one creates that journey. An aspect of freedom is not to block the path, but rather to walk with them. This became very clear to me when Alfred, at 22, said he was going to walk across the United States to find God, to find out what people were really like and to find himself. Filled with fear of what could happen to him, I listened and responded: "Taking this trip is a risk; however, it is a greater risk not to take it."

How frightening those months were! I would be so cool when he called. Then I would hang up and cry my eyes out. What I learned is that each child chooses a different route — sometimes one that parents would not choose. However, the choice is not ours.

Mary was a model for me. As I read Scripture and prayed with her, I recognized her courage to do God's will for herself. Don't forget that she was a young, unmarried, pregnant woman living in a culture that prescribed that unmarried, pregnant women should be stoned to death.

I saw a mother who walked with her son as he traveled his path to find and be his true self. She was with him in the journey toward his passion and death on the cross. There is a movie scene in which Mary lets out a scream of anguish as her Son is taken from the cross and placed in her arms. I can relate to that scream; I know that that is what mothers do. Mary is an inspiration for me to understand that it is powerful to walk with our children in their journeys.

As a young mother, I had many doubts. My beliefs about important aspects of my relationship with our children were so different from what others said a mother's role *should* be: "You should put your children first, before your husband, before yourself." I observed mothers who put their children first, who did not develop themselves and were strangers with their husbands. The process seemed distorted to me.

Al and I had begun our lives together and would end up together. The children would grow up and go their own ways, and I wanted a good relationship between Al and me. I even questioned why there had to be a "first." Couldn't we all share equally? We had in my childhood home.

When I would share this thought with people, they told me that I didn't love the children, that I was selfish and self-centered. Two profound experiences helped me claim my own understanding.

Two young women who were mothers died. I saw that one family was totally paralyzed. Dad did not even know where the underwear was kept. The children were lost because Mommy had done everything for them. In the other family, the op-

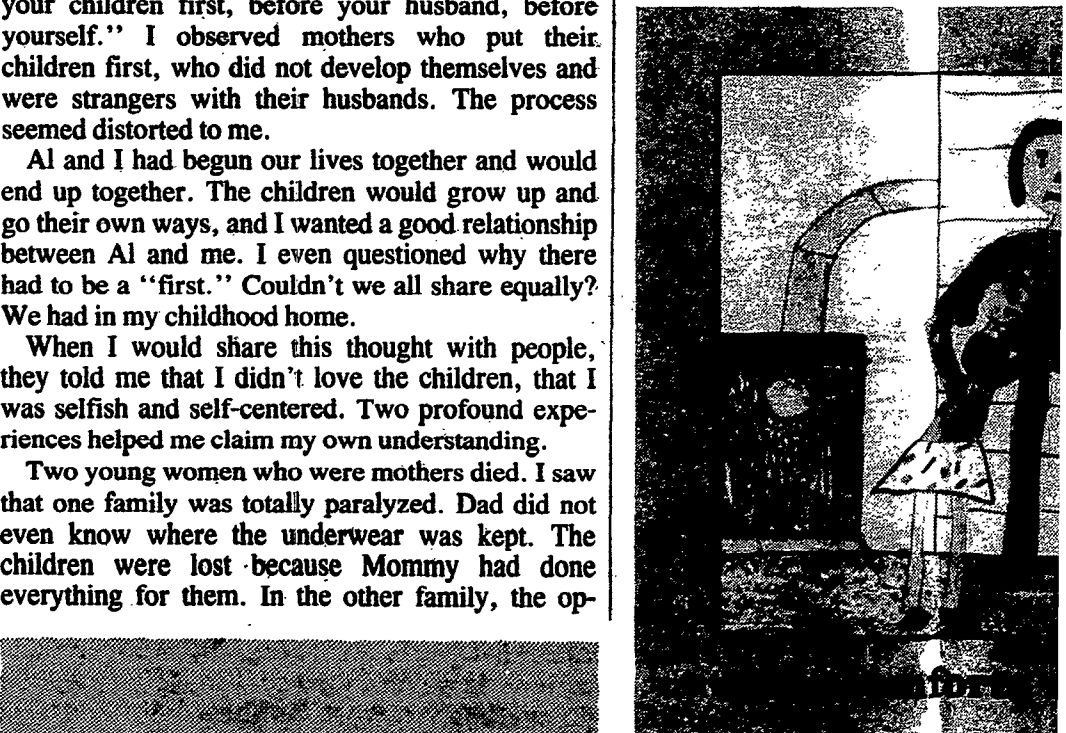
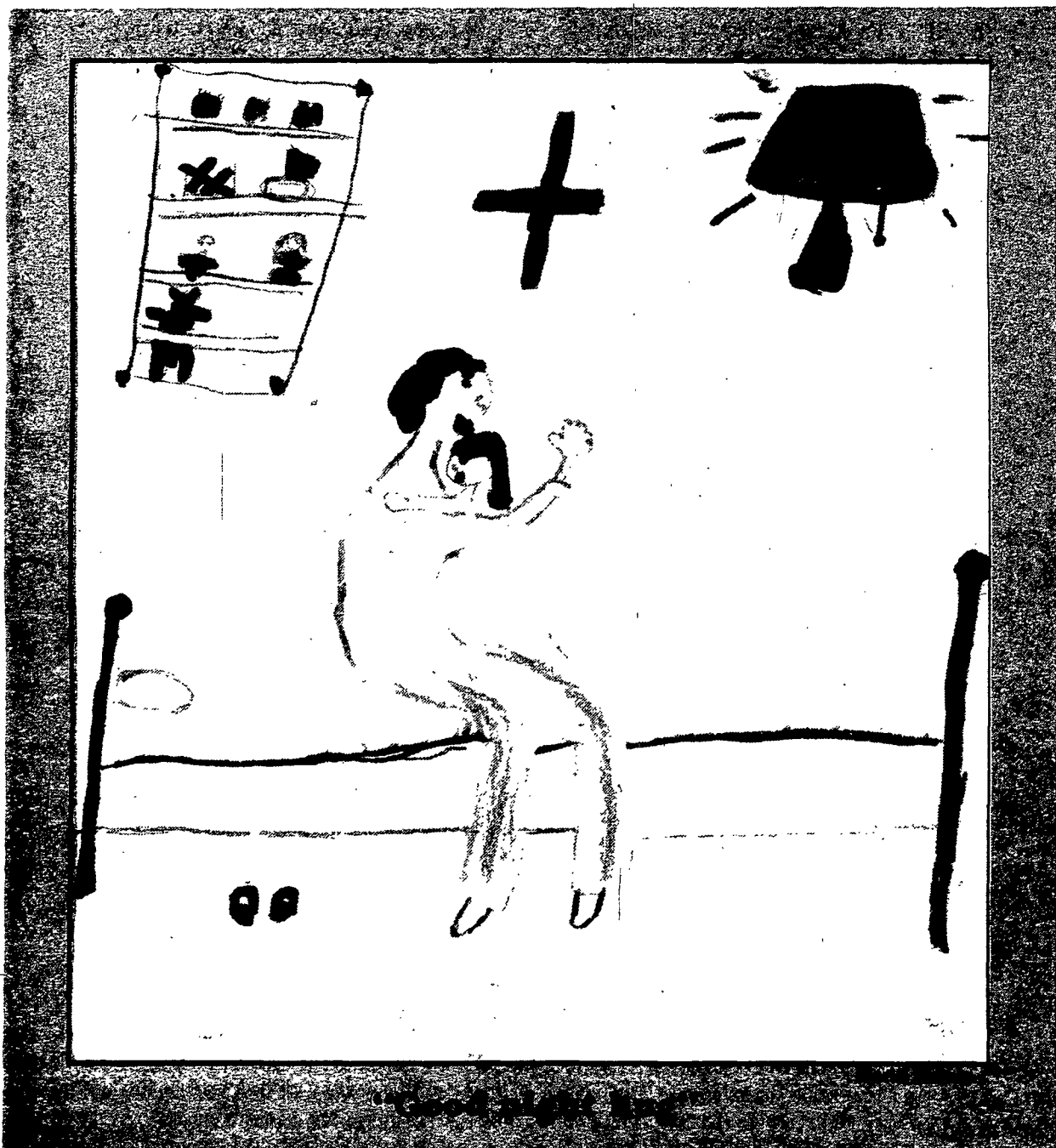
posite was happening. The husband were able to move on and take care of even though they missed the woman who

I prayed and reflected and learned One, I might not be alive all the children's lives; I could die young, too. I wanted Al and the children to be able to take care of themselves. Actually, the issue with Al because he shared all the abilities of childrearing and home management confirmed my belief that a mother-power children to develop skills for living.

Another profound experience happened on an ordinary field trip while studying the gate Rochester Divinity School. A pastoral counseling visited a psychiatrist do case studies on clients. The case I that of a 48-year-old woman who u identity totally as a mother. When her up and left home to make their own li not let them go because in letting the she would be nothing. The record said given up her mind."

Much prayer and reflection followed. I was aware that this woman had full mature understanding of women in so to question other expectations placed on them. My own observations of women who norms showed that they resulted in u tionships. These reflections led me to trism in the church and society, where not considered fully human, not i Women's experiences were always d others thought they *should* be.

Through prayer, discussion, study God granted me the grace of a consciousness. I am full of gratitude because it has empowered me to que tions and has confirmed many of my b A sexist understanding of family i



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