

like a ladder. Father is at the top rung, with male children on the next rung, wife/mother on the next, and female children on the last rung. Our family, however, was built in a circle. We shared life together: the work, the play, the joys, the sorrows, the questions and answers. Very often, it was the children who provided insights and creative solutions to difficult situations.

One of my biggest struggles was to learn that I was not responsible *for* my children. I was responsible *to* them and *with* them. The only person I am responsible *for* is myself. In the moments of greatest pain, I had to face the truth that I sometimes wanted our children to be a reflection of me. They are not. They are images of God; they are ways that God was trying to show me who God is.

I truly believe that everyone's primary vocation is to become a human person by becoming one's own self. For me, this is the meaning of the Incarnation, God becoming human to call us to engage in the process of becoming human. My experience of mothering our four children has been most humanizing. Alfred, Erika, Kurt and Michael have been the teachers who empowered me to develop my strengths and know my own vulnerability.

Vulnerability connects me in a special way to them and to Al. Memories flash in front of me: first steps, first words, falls from the swing set, first dates, licenses, devastating rejection — each touched a vulnerability of the bond among us. And we all grew as we risked sharing our vulnerability.

Another way the experience of motherhood humanized me is that our children did the things I feared the most. I always feared that if those things happened to me, I would not be able to cope, I would literally die from the pain. Well, I did not die, although I named it crucifixion time. What I learned was amazing: that I could love them more than I ever thought I was capable. I named that resurrection time.

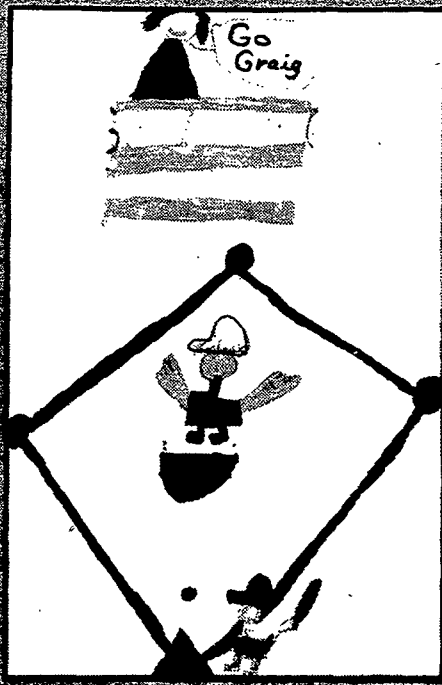
Mothering gives us an opportunity to learn to love our children unconditionally. Unconditional love, though, is a both/and experience. The both/and is the immense joy and the flaming rage they can stir up in me. At one moment, you are so happy they are your children. The next moment, you wonder if you have any influence on them at all. To love our children unconditionally makes it imperative that we be advocates for them.

By advocating, I mean being on their side, ensuring that no one else infringes on their dignity and worth. I remember a teacher who treated one of our sons as "dumb" because he had difficulty learning math. An advocate insists that the difficulty has nothing to do with whether the child is a good person.

Children also fulfill a basic human need to be needed. That leads me to one of the occupational hazards of mothering. Because children need you so much, you feel important, and you are. However, if this is your only sense of importance, you will want to keep those children dependent and needy. This can be disastrous to both parties. A woman in her mother role can deny a life of her own and live only through the children. When this happens, the children are bonded to the mother with duty and guilt. When a woman has her own center, her own self, the bonds with her children are through love and freedom.

1982 was a year of transition for our family. In May, Kurt married Nancy, who blessed us with our first grandchildren, Michelle and Gary. Michael graduated from high school and was off to college. In September, Alfred and Becky married each other. Erika was living on her own. After 27 years of living with children, Al and I were alone with each other. How happy I was that we had created a meaningful relationship; we were not strangers. We were good friends.

Marriages expand the circle of love. Perhaps parents ought not to look for signs that they have done a "good job" of raising children, but we do. One of the signs for me is the kind of people with whom my children fall in love.



Al and I can congratulate ourselves because Nancy, Becky, Jim and Germaine are wonderful human beings. As we welcome them to our family, they help us grow more because they bring different traditions, different styles, and that helps us to develop ourselves.

As the family changes, everyone's needs change, too. The children don't need our approval or validation. They need our love. They need us to listen and talk with them. They are proud when we ask them for advice; and they listen carefully to ours.

My needs are changing, too. I don't cook on holidays. They take turns, and are so happy to open their homes and hearts to all of us.

I am becoming aware of how real are the cycles of life. There was a time when our gatherings were very quiet and orderly. Now, with eight grandchildren, it is wonderfully noisy and confusing. As I look at the faces of Michelle, Gary, Nichole, Andrea, Jacob, Benjamin, Philip and Kristen, I see the face of God. It is different from the face of God I see in the faces of our children. I understand the Scripture, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh" in a very special way.

Mothering as I experience it is more than what mothers do. Mothering is being in intimate relationships. It is the way fathers, sisters, brothers, friends relate to one another equally. It is the respect we give for one another. It is a love that does not claim that "you are mine" but rather that "you are yours."

Mothering is a living, organic process, never static, always changing, passed from generation to generation. Last year, as I was going through a painful experience, I went to my parents' home, and Mom, Dad, Carol and Mike hugged me. It was healing. Mothering celebrates a living, loving, being God. I see it every day in Al's presence. I see it as I watch Erika, Kurt and Al in the process of mothering their children.

We need each other to affirm how good we are — especially when, as humans, we forget. We need each other in a community of equals to be with us in the journey toward holiness and wholeness. We need each other to celebrate the God that is with us, whose loving presence has been in the mothering process with us yesterday, today and tomorrow.

About Insight

Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt has taught religious education for 37 years, including five years at Nazareth Academy. She earned a master's degree in divinity from Chicago's Loyola University, and currently offers classes, retreats and "playshops" on a freelance basis. Active in the Catholic feminist movement, she serves on the national board of Mary's Pence.

Drawings are courtesy of third-graders at St. Joseph's School, Wayland.

MOTHERS