

A background image showing a bright sun setting or rising over a range of mountains, with rays of light spreading across the sky.

The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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Motherhood: Editor's Introduction

This is a double issue to give some room to a major subject: motherhood, which the Bulletin also addressed [two years ago](#). For most mothers, raising a family is the most fulfilling experience of their lives – but it is usually the most demanding, stressful, and depleting one as well (see [Mother Nurture](#)). The harder parts of motherhood don't get much attention, and there has been little effort to remedy the long-term stress and depletion of many mothers – arguably the greatest unaddressed public health problem in America and other developed nations.

Systematic efforts to improve the physical and mental health of mothers would be a highly leveraged investment of social capital since the mother's own well-being is a major factor for the development of her children, for the course of her relationship with her partner, for the fabric of communities. Plus mothers have needs and rights of their own. So we think it's important to face these issues.

Of course, fatherhood is also challenging for men. But women face unique physiological and psychological impacts from bearing children, and usually shoulder more of the task, stress, and executive responsibilities of rearing them as well. Additionally, it is mothers who most often pay a career and sometimes

Greetings

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financial price for having children (e.g., *The Price of Motherhood*). So, with great respect for fathers, we'll focus on mothers here.

Motherhood is a complicated subject, and it's gotten politicized in numerous ways. There is no way we can do justice to all these complexities, so we hope you will forgive us for the many important topics, nuances, and groups that we leave out. For example, while many women are raising children alone, or with another woman, or in a relationship other than marriage, for simplicity we'll sometimes refer to her partner as her husband.

Each one of us has had a mother; most of us have been raised in large part or more by a mother; most young women think about becoming a mother; about three in four women

in America will become one; roughly four million women have a baby each year in America, three million or so for the first time; metaphors of motherhood pervade our culture (e.g., mother nature, mother earth, virgin mother, the Tao that is the mother of all things). When we look closely at motherhood, we see large portions of the tapestry of our lives. When we act skillfully to support mothers, we help ourselves – and generations to come.



The Marathon of Motherhood

Adapted from Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, by Rick Hanson, Ph.D., Jan Hanson, L.Ac., and Ricki Pollycove, M.D.

Motherhood is a long journey, a marathon, not a sprint.

It begins before your first child is born: that incredible moment when you know you've conceived a new being, the long pregnancy, fixing up the baby's room, finally the birth itself, and then the little breathing bundle, the life delivered into your arms. The details differ a bit if you've adopted a child, but the essentials are the same: anticipation, nervousness, and an extraordinary love.

Some parts are a blur and others a long slow grind. Feeding, diapers, long nights with the baby, the first steps, the first words, the first everything. Tantrums, story time, bouncing a ball, wiping a chin, high chairs, tiny chairs, wiping crayons off chairs. Day care, nursery school, the first day of first grade, watching that sturdy back trudge down the hall to class.

Camps, Cub Scouts, Girl Scouts, bullies, buddies, soccer games, Little League, balls caught, dropped, kicked, and lost. Chores, bedtimes, discipline, angry words and loving forgiveness.

The grades tick by, good teachers and bad, science fairs and spelling lists, too much homework or not enough, that great moment when your child knows the answer to a question and you don't.

Somewhere in there your youngest turns eight or ten and you think, It's half over, where has the time gone? Middle school, high school, pimples and makeup and

dating and fingernails chewed after midnight until you hear a step at the door. Strange music and stranger friends, coltish and gawky, solemn and wise. All the while, the birthdays have ticked by, some with numbers that echo: one, two, six, ten, thirteen, sixteen. Then the eighteenth: what now?

The marathon doesn't end there, though it becomes more meandering and less consuming. Loans that are really gifts, advice that is rejected loudly and followed quietly, graduations, postcards from Mexico or Maui, the bittersweet joy of watching your child walk down a wedding aisle, a down payment with your name on it. If your children have kids, your journey takes on a second sort of mothering.

You age and your children don't seem to. There comes that time when the trajectory of your life is clearly falling back to earth as your children's ascends. You drift into old age and there is a subtle shift of care and power. And then the final moments come,

your veined and aged hands in the strong ones of your children, squeezing, a kiss, a final blessing, a farewell, an ending to the path you walked as a mother, and the beginning of a mysterious new one.

It's a long, long road. You have to pace yourself down it, not racing like it's a hundred-yard dash.



You have to set aside time to catch your breath - and admire the view! You need good companions, like a loving and supportive partner, and the company of other mothers. You need to keep replenishing yourself with good nutrition, exercise, sleep, and enjoyable activities. You need realistic expectations for yourself. And faith and hope that the months and years ahead will give you more chances to get things right.

If you regarded motherhood as a long marathon, spanning twenty years or more, how might you shift the demands you place on yourself? How might you assert yourself to get more help from others? How might you take better care of your body? Or better nourish your inner being? Or simply be nicer to yourself?

When you start taking the long view about the incredible and profound matter of bearing and rearing children, it starts to make more sense, the daily hassles are less irritating, you're likely to take better care of yourself - and the journey becomes less stressful, more meaningful, and more rewarding!



Swimming Upstream

Adapted from Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships, by Rick Hanson, Ph.D., Jan Hanson, L.Ac., and Ricki Pollycove, M.D.

When I think back to my own mom, she always seemed so on top of things. I feel dismayed and guilty that I'm not handling things as well and feel a lot more frazzled than she seemed to be.

We've heard this comment from many mothers, and it's both poignant and sadly unfair to the women who feel this way, since times have changed so dramatically. In response, we'd like to offer this excerpt from our book, *Mother Nurture*.

Let's step back for a minute and look at how we got here. During more than 99% of the time that humans (or our close ancestors) have lived on this planet, mothers raised families in small groups of hunter-gatherers. If you had been among them, your life would have moved at the speed of a walk while you provided for your needs and fulfilled your ambitions with a child on your hip or nearby. You would have eaten fresh and organic foods saturated in micro-nutrients and breathed air and drunk water free of artificial chemicals. Most important of all, you would have spent much of your day with other mothers, surrounded by a supportive community of relatives, friends, and neighbors. These are the conditions to which your body and mind are adapted for raising children.

Unfortunately, while the essential activities of mothering - pregnancy, childbirth, breastfeeding, worrying and planning and loving with all your heart - have not altered one bit, our world has changed profoundly, and evolution hasn't had time to catch up. You and we are genetically identical to the first modern humans of

200,000 years ago, and nearly identical to our earliest tool-using ancestors, who lived over two million years ago.

Nonetheless, at odds with this basic genetic blueprint, most mothers today must rush about stressfully, constantly juggling and multi-tasking. Few modern jobs can be done with young children around, so working means spending much of the day separated from your kids – and the stresses of the unnatural schedule and pace they must then handle affect them in ways that naturally spill over onto you.

Compared to our ancestors, most of us eat much fewer vegetables and whole foods, and much more white flour, sugar, and artificial chemicals, and we can't help absorbing some of the billions of pounds of toxins released into the environment each year, which even leave traces in breast milk. The so-called village it takes to raise a child usually looks more like a ghost town, so you have to rely more on your mate than did mothers in times past – but he, too, is strained by the unprecedented busyness and intensity of modern life.

If you feel like you're swimming upstream, it's because raising children was not



meant to be this way. Many of the problems that seem purely personal or marital actually start on the other side of your front door.

Of course, the world is not going to change back to the time of the hunter-gatherers (and we'd miss refrigerators and telephones too much if it did!). And those times certainly had their own difficulties, such as famine or disease. But, like every mother, you can't help but feel the impact of the whirlwind we're all living in.

Just how you're affected is as individual as a baby's footprint. Some mothers are fortunate to have low demands, substantial resources, and low vulnerabilities. All too often, however, the demands are high, resources are low, and resilience gets worn down: a mother's "cupboard" gets emptied out and shaken and it's an uphill struggle to get anything back in. No wonder that, over time, some signs of wear begin to show.

That's why we think it's so important you and every mother to take active steps to lower her stresses and increase her resources: that's mother nurture.



Are You Feeling Depleted?

© Rick Hanson, Ph.D. and Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac.

Before having kids, I had a lot of energy and felt very healthy. But now, with a 4 year old and a baby, I'm run down, I get colds frequently, and my menstrual cycle has gotten more intense. My doctor's sympathetic but says I'm fine. What do you think?

We think you are trying your hardest and that you feel the way you do for very concrete, physical reasons. Understanding them gives you clarity and sends guilt packing. Plus it points you toward effective ways to feel less stressed, stay energetic and healthy, and build teamwork and intimacy with your mate.

Think about it: motherhood is profoundly fulfilling. But it is also the most relentlessly stressful and demanding activity most women – or men! – will ever do.

“The hardest job in the world” gets done day after day for twenty years or more. And it's all the more demanding the more kids you have, or if any of your children have special needs like a challenging temperament, disability, or health problem.

Some dads are great: they're engaged with the kids, do their fair share around the house, and are loving with their wife. But let's face it: many are not. The average mom works about twenty hours a week more than her partner, regardless of whether she's drawing a paycheck. And if you're rearing your children essentially alone, as do one in five mothers, you're getting little to no help from a partner at all.

Plus most mothers are living today in a world that is vastly different from the hunter-gatherer culture that humans are adapted to for raising a family. In a tribal

or village setting, a mom's life moved at the pace of a walk with her children nearby. She was surrounded by other mothers or relatives who could lend a hand with her kids, her stresses were intermittent instead of chronic, and the delicate biological machinery of reproduction wasn't exposed daily to man-made chemicals. Sure, we're not proposing a return to the Stone Age, but there is no way around the harsh fact that today's frantic pace, lack of supportive community, scary culture, need to juggle work and home, toxic pollutants that even appear in breast milk, etc. all wear on a mother's body and mind.

It all adds up over time. You're pouring out more and handling more stresses, but taking less in. It's no wonder if you feel used up, emptied out – in a word, DEPLETED. Besides being a psychological experience, depletion occurs in the bodies of many, many mothers. Laboratory tests commonly show that mothers have dangerously low levels of key nutrients and that important bodily systems (e.g., hormonal, immune, gastrointestinal, nervous) have become disturbed.

As a result of all these factors, scientific studies have found that motherhood (and an increasing number of children) raises a woman's risks for:



- Thyroid disease
- Autoimmune conditions
- Type II diabetes
- Depression
- Gallbladder and kidney disease
- Nutritional deficits
- Intensified PMS
- Fatigue
- Some kinds of cancer
- A shortened lifespan

This is a sobering list of health problems! To be sure: motherhood is NOT itself a medical issue. But its physical and psychological consequences often impact a woman’s mental and physical health, and her marriage – leading to billions of dollars in health care expenses and lost productivity in the country as a whole. Even just everyday experiences of feeling frazzled, weary, irritable, overwhelmed, blue, or let down wear on a mother’s well-being and cast a dark cloud over a time that should be so wonderful.

If fatherhood exposed men to similar risks, there’d be a national outcry. But since these involve “just” women, they are taken for granted.

Our society glorifies the wonderful side of motherhood, but it doesn’t want to



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look at the challenges. For example, new moms fall off the radar of the health care system a couple months postpartum – as if bearing and rearing children made no long-term difference. Articles in popular magazines for mothers rarely go beyond

chirpy proclamations that all problems can be solved with stuff like low-fat casseroles or clever tricks with a screaming baby. And compared to other Western, industrial nations, America ranks dead last in family leave and other family-friendly policies.

This blind spot – or worse, denial – in our national consciousness makes many moms think that feeling run down must be their own fault in some way. Consequently, they delay (or never do . . .) the self-care, thorough check-ups, or firmly speaking up for themselves with their partner that would reverse the downward slide of depletion.

It's a pity, since there are so many research-proven ways to lower stress, replenish your body, heal the health problems common among mothers, get more help from your mate, and nurture a lasting and loving marriage after children.

Meanwhile, you can start feeling better by simply knowing that you are not alone, that objective factors have brought you to this point (not a personal failing!), and that there are plenty of good ways to improve your health, your mood, and your marriage after children. Whether you're feeling just a little bit worn out – or even that you're running on empty – try this simple suggestion: Commit to doing one simple thing for your own health or well-being for three days in a row, and on the third day, decide if you want to keep doing it.

We wish you the best!

Words of Wisdom

Being a full-time mother is one of the highest salaried jobs in my field, since the payment is pure love.

Mildred B. Vermont

Call it a clan, call it a network, call it a tribe, call it a family. Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.

Jane Howard

The moment a child is born, the mother is also born. She never existed before. The woman existed, but the mother, never. A mother is something absolutely new.

Rajneesh

The precursor of the mirror is the mother's face.

D.W. Winnicott

It is not flesh and blood but the heart which makes us fathers and sons.

Johann Schiller

Mother's love is peace. It need not be acquired, it need not be deserved.

Erich Fromm

You don't choose your family. They are God's gift to you, as you are to them.

Desmond Tutu

The family - that dear octopus from whose tentacles we never quite escape, nor, in our inmost hearts, ever quite wish to.

Dodie Smith

If evolution really works, how come mothers only have two hands?

Milton Berle

*Because I feel that in the heavens above
The angels, whispering one to another,
Can find among their burning tears
of love,*

Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that suppose to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing.

Toni Morrison

*None so devotional as that of "Mother,"
Therefore, by that dear name I have long
called you,*

You who are more than mother unto me.

Edgar Allan Poe

10 Reasons to Take Good Care of a Mother

© Rick Hanson, Ph.D. and Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac.

Having a child is absolutely a big deal, and there's no longer the strong network of social support for it - from relatives, friends, and neighbors - that there was in generations past, let alone in the hunter-gatherer groups in which humans evolved. And many fathers have not stepped up to fill the vacuum: the average mother is working away about 20 hours a week more than her partner is, whether or not she's drawing a paycheck. As result, the day-to-day -- minute-to-minute -- activities of caring for a young child usually fall mainly to the mother.

Precious Work

It's precious work, certainly. But like everything in life, it has effects. Over time, everything you pour out, everything you do, adds up. Most mothers report feeling pretty worn out and often frazzled by the end of their baby's first year, and our experience is that actually the deepest slump typically occurs a few years after the baby is born, especially if there's been a second child or another significant stressor (like a move, mom goes back to paid work, or the child has a real challenging temperament).

Inevitable Effects

As a result, studies have shown that having one or more children - especially when there's not much support for her role - increases the chance that a woman will experience physical or mental health problems, including fatigue, depressed mood, anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, Type 2 diabetes, nutritional deficits, or autoimmune

illnesses. Lack of support also wears on a relationship, breeding resentments, the sense of being let down, no interest in sex, and lots of quarrels. The bottom-line: many mothers get physically and psychologically depleted during the early years of parenthood, some to the extent that we have proposed that there can be an actual Depleted Mother Syndrome (DMS).

Impacts on the Family

None of this is good for the mother, to be sure. And it cannot help but spill over onto the children, both in terms of less patience and energy for them as well as the impact on them of problems in their parents' relationship. Plus it naturally affects fathers, too. Researchers have found that fathers who are more involved in the daily life of the family and strong teammates with the mother have better mood, more sense of pride in their competence as a parent, and a closer and more satisfying relationship with their partner. Not bad!

A Crying Shame

Even though the effects of maternal stress and depletion are plainly visible in



well-documented research - and affect society as a whole through increased healthcare expenses, lost workforce productivity, and the social costs of divorce - there's been shockingly little attention to the needs of mothers.

Perspectives on Self-Care

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.

As a mother, you disappeared off the radar of the healthcare system after your final postpartum appointment and whether you had a child became medically irrelevant. At the National Institute of Health or the Centers for Disease Control, there's zero attention to the long-term health and well-being of mothers. Few psychology graduate schools teach anything about how to help women with the unique and chronic stresses of raising a family, or how to help couples with kids be strong teammates while preserving an intimate friendship.

In the culture as a whole, a positive sign is a growing willingness to help with postpartum depression and with the longer-term challenges of bearing and rearing children. Nonetheless, mothers still get routinely told that their weariness, blue mood, and out-of-whack bodies are "just in your head, get over it." There's guilt and shame about not being able to live up to models in the media of the woman who can work full-time, have cute and well-mannered kids, stay trim and fit, and have a shiny clean kitchen sink. With the common lack of support for childrearing at many levels - from fathers, from extended family, and from government policies - many mothers feel torn between giving their children the very best and giving their occupation/career the very best and few are entirely happy with whatever compromise they end up making.

Adding insult to injury, a lot of this gets internalized within mothers, making them feel weak or guilty about doing "selfish" things for themselves, asking for

help, or insisting that others pull their fair share of the weight.

It All Starts with Motivation

It will probably be a long time before much changes at the level of government policies or culture. And in our experience, to be blunt, many fathers do not just wake up one day and see the light on their own. Consequently, it is usually up to the mother to take a big breath, stand up, and assert why it's right and proper for her to get appropriate attention, support, and care. Those good reasons are motivating for her and for others -- and that's where everything starts in life: with our intentions.

So please take a look at our list of ten good reasons to support mothers. They're all based on solid experience, research, and ethical reasoning. There's no special treatment here: if men were the ones having babies, the same list would apply to them. And feel free to add reasons of your own!



In Conclusion

Mothers get stressed and depleted over time through the accumulation of a thousand little things. Therefore, it is through doing little things each day that are good for you that you accumulate a growing pile of positive resources for your health, well-being, strong teamwork, and lasting love.

10 Reasons to Take Good Care of a Mother

These are worth knowing for a mother herself, and for anyone who knows her.

1. **She's a person** - Every human being deserves a chance to be happy and healthy.
2. **Her cupboard was already pretty bare** - Before their first pregnancy, most mothers don't consume all the recommended vitamins and minerals. Those shelves need re-stocking.
3. **Her body's carried a big load** - Taken as a whole, pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, and weaning are the most physically demanding activities most people will ever do. Big outputs require big inputs.
4. **She does hard work** - Studies show that raising young children is more stressful than most jobs. Any kind of demanding work calls for respite and replenishment.
5. **She contributes to others** - Mothers get worn out not because they've been eating bon-bons, but because every day, for twenty years or more, they've been making a family for innocent and precious children. Their giving gives them moral standing, a valid claim on society's care.
6. **It's good for the children** - A mother's well-being affects her children in a thousand ways, shaping the lifetime course of a human life. The best way to take good care of children is to take good care of mothers.
7. **It's good for her partner** - A mother is much more able to be even-tempered, affectionate, and loving when her mate is an active co-parent, shares the load fairly, and is just plain nice. It's enlightened self-interest for a mother's partner to take good care of her.

8. **It's good for the marriage** - Mothers who are well-nurtured and have supportive partners are much more likely to stay happily married than those who do not. Besides the rewards for children and their parents, lasting marriages benefit society in many ways, such as bringing stability to communities, lowering demands on the court system, and fostering respect for family.

9. **It helps the economy** - Maternal stress and depletion increase the nation's medical costs, and they decrease workforce productivity. They're public health problems, and addressing them would both aid our economy and increase tax revenues.

10. **It's good for society** - A culture that values caring for those who are vulnerable, giving, and engaged in long-term wholesome projects (like raising children) - e.g., mothers - will be generally more humane and infused with positive values. And that's good for everyone.

And a bonus reason: Being compassionate, considerate, and generous with a mother feels good in itself. It's also a deep form of spiritual practice to "love your neighbor as yourself" - even the one sitting with you at the dining room table.



10 Reasons to Take Good Care of a Father

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My husband's getting on my nerves a little. The baby is just six months old and now I'm back to work, too, but still Brett is starting to bug me more and more for attention, affection, sex, etc. Doesn't he understand I've got a lot on my plate?! Can't he grow up and deal with his needs or whatever and then in a while when things settle down we can connect more?

We truly understand where you are coming from: Jan gave Rick pretty much the same speech at least a dozen times when our kids were little, plus we've heard similar comments from many, many mothers. It's natural to feel both absorbed in your baby and worn out, so that any extra tug on you from someone else can seem like a hassle, if not an intrusive burden.

Having said that, from painful personal experience and much professional contact with literally thousands of parents, we also think it's a terrible mistake to set your husband or partner aside when baby makes three. It is as big a mistake as the one many fathers make, to downplay the impact of motherhood on their partner and to fail to pull their weight with childrearing and housework.



Frankly, if all new mothers made a serious effort to stay emotionally and affectionately connected with the father, and if all new fathers made a serious effort to understand what the mother is going through and be a strong teammate in making a family together, we believe the divorce rate among couples with children would be cut in half.

And even if there's no divorce, the impacts of events during the sensitive years when kids are little are so great that they can lead to permanent coolness, cankerous wounds, and a vulnerability to challenges down the road (e.g., an illness, unemployment, a temptation at the office).

So there are plenty of reasons - some altruistic and some enlightened self-interest - to take good care of a father. (The ones who stay engaged, to be sure, not the ones who abandon their children.) You've just read "10 Reasons to Take Good Care of a Mother" -- and here is its companion piece. (For simplicity, we use the terms "marriage" and "relationship," and "husband/wife" and "partner" interchangeably.)

10 Reasons to Take Good Care of a Father

1. **He's a person** - Every human being deserves a chance to be happy and healthy.
2. **He does real work** - Most fathers step up their efforts to be a provider when kids come along. Plus the typical dad today is doing more housework and childcare than his own father did. Any kind of demanding work calls for respect and replenishment.
3. **He contributes to others** - Every day, for twenty years or more, engaged fathers help make a family for innocent and precious children. Their giving gives them moral standing, and a valid claim on the respect and support of their partner and society as a whole.
4. **The workplace isn't very friendly to men who put their families first** - While it's certainly hard for women to juggle home and work, men who stick up for their role as fathers often get even less understanding on the job than mothers do.
5. **It's good for the children** - A father's well-being affects his children in a thousand ways, and shapes the course of their entire lives. A vital way to take good care of children is to take good care of their fathers.

6. **It's good for the mother** - Fathers who are happy in their marriage are usually more empathic, helpful, and loving with their wife.
7. **It's good for the marriage** - Fathers who feel cared about, listened to, seen and valued as a lover and mate (not just a co-parent), respected and appreciated, and - frankly - sexually satisfied are much more likely to stay married than those who do not. Besides the rewards for children and their parents, lasting marriages benefit society in many ways, such as bringing stability to communities and fostering respect for family.
8. **It helps the economy** - Personal issues and relationship problems related to parenthood stress fathers; these stresses contribute to physical and mental health conditions that increase a country's medical costs and decrease workforce productivity. These are public health consequences, and addressing them would aid the economy as a whole plus increase tax revenues.
9. **It's good for society** - A culture that takes a stand for families by respecting and supporting the fathers as well as the mothers at their center will be more humane and decent for everyone.
10. **It's good in itself** - Being compassionate, considerate, and generous with a father feels good in its own right. It is also a deep form of spiritual practice to "love your neighbor as yourself" - including the one sitting with you at the dining room table.



The Real Gift of Parenting

© Rick Hanson, Ph.D. and Jan Hanson, M.S., L.Ac.

Here's a comment about the holiday season that we have heard from many parents – and we've sometimes felt much the same way ourselves:

Last year, the holidays were crazy! I seemed to spend most of my time standing in line or carrying bags. We spent a small fortune on assorted complicated gizmos -- which got opened and then ignored as my daughter and son spent most of the day playing with \$2.99 worth of stickers. We got stressed out in order to relax and suffered in order to have fun. My husband and I stared at each other across the flotsam and jetsam of wrapping paper and various pieces of who-knows-what, and you could see the look in each of our eyes: Say what?!

As you brave the holiday shopping crowds – trying to decide whether to give Barbie or Big Bird, Legos or (good grief) an iPod -- or hassle with returns and sales in January, it's easy to feel a little overwhelmed, and distracted from the real gifts that are at the heart of parenting.

But happily, when you relax a bit and come back to yourself, the true gifts of parenting come back to mind, the ones that go deeper than giving our kids toys and games -- or even a college education.

Over and over again, a hundred times each day, we freely offer a hug, a smile, a touch, a scolding, a sandwich, a paycheck earned, a story read, a bed tucked in, a goodnight kiss. So many things, so rapidly readily given that we hardly notice them -- but they are the fabric of family, new threads added many times each hour, warm and cozy and nurturing, the

blanket of love in which we wrap our precious vulnerable beloved children.

We offer our lap when our back hurts, we offer our heart when it feels empty. We let our children enter our thoughts when our minds seem stuffed with grown-up concerns and plans.

Our offerings are not just material or actions. We also offer restraint, wise not-doing. We let small things slide. We take into account a no-nap, hungry day . . . or a tough strike-out in Little League . . . or a major dump on our daughter by her best friend. We give the gift of self-control, of not swatting or yelling or overreacting - even when, yes, it would be a relief.

We let our children have us when we feel all too “had” by others. We give even when others haven’t given enough to us: our coworkers, our boss, our spouse, our own parents.

We give even when a part of ourselves may not want to; often the most meaningful giving to our children is offered when our personal preference would be to do something else.

We find more water when the wellspring seems to have run dry.



Most fundamentally, we give our selves. We open the door wide; we give our children access to the vulnerable places in our heart; we let them enter our souls; we let them crawl oh so deeply under our skin.

Our children give us so much to be sure. The act of parenting has its own rewards. And we need to take care of ourselves so that we can continue to have something to give to our children.

But parents don't give to get. And in the moment of giving to a child we often don't get back much at all. Fundamentally, parenting is not an exchange: we are not playing let's-make-a-deal with our children.

Parenting is an ongoing process of healthy sacrifice: the sacrifice of attention, time, energy, money, personal agendas, and all the activities we would prefer to do if we were not parenting.

Of course, we sacrifice not as martyrs but with our eyes open, freely, with strength, with all the ordinary little heroic acts that make up the daily life of a parent.

We sacrifice our individual selves into relationship with our children. We release for a moment the sense of contraction as an isolated self into the joining of love, a love that may feel for some as if it partakes of something that's ultimately Divine.



Sacrifice means “sacred act.” During this seasonal time, of plunging into the dark to be renewed for the swelling of the light, a period that’s sacred in many cultures around the world -- it’s a lovely, self-nurturing thing to reflect a bit on what may be for you the sacred essence of parenting.



About the Authors

Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a neuropsychologist and author of the bestselling *Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom* (in 21 languages). Founder of the



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Fare Well

May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.