

I Salute You, Mother

By Debra Larson

"Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all."

~Proverbs 31:29

When my four boys were under the age of seven, and I was too tired to think straight, I abandoned reason altogether. I went to a café for breakfast. With the kids. Without my husband. I didn't ordinarily take them to restaurants because I don't like paying for a bad time. But a friend with only two kids, aged six and seven, suggested it, and I didn't want to decline. Honestly, she probably said the magic words "my treat," and I couldn't resist. So I drew in a deep breath and prepared myself for syrup in the hair and water streaming across the table, while trying to remain relaxed enough to nurse a baby.

Other than the standard soggy islands of napkins on the table and enough food for the next day's breakfast on the floor, our dining experience went remarkably well. I even managed a few bites. As we were leaving, I collected the endless baby accoutrements, heaving the diaper bag with such force it almost propelled me in a circle. Then I collected the small humans, carrying the smallest of the lot, and ushered the noisy line toward the door.

As I passed the table of an elderly man, he smiled and told me my boys reminded him of his family. "I have four boys," he said. He was dining alone, and I felt obliged to stop. He straightened his silverware and then looked up at me. His slow movement in my frenzied world heightened my impatience. I was tired, hungry, and losing kids out the front door. I hoped my friend would corral them. I bounced the baby on my hip, anticipating that one of us would need calming soon.

"Make sure they grow up to respect themselves," he said. I stopped bouncing the baby. That was not a line I was expecting. "They will learn that from you," he added.

My teaching hadn't really gotten beyond "don't bite" and "get it in the potty." But he was right. My boys would learn many things from me that I wasn't deliberately teaching, at least not now. I told the man I understood the importance of my role as teacher.

"They're also learning about love from you," he said.

I hadn't really thought about that. Tender moments I'd shared with my boys sprang to mind, endless gazing sessions where we'd get lost in each others' eyes, soft words of love carried on warm breath. Yes, true. Mothers have a unique intimacy and corporal attentiveness to their children, an extension, perhaps, of the physical bond in pregnancy.

Although the man was quiet, his introspective manner told me he wasn't done. I shifted the baby on my hip, as he remained lost in thought. Chaos was due to track me down any minute. I raised my eyebrows. And...?

Then he looked at me with humility and what seemed to be adoration, not the look I typically elicit from strangers in a restaurant. His reverent gaze lingered, instantly exposing me as the barely-put-together jumble of smells and stains that hadn't always been part of my look.

A smile softened his face, and I could see that words had finally come to him.

"I salute you..." he said, pausing for a split second to emphasize his next word, "Mother."

His sincerity touched me through the busyness that had overtaken me. I blinked hard and smiled. Weary and disheveled, I stood tall, sheathed in the true dignity of motherhood.

