

# THE WEEK

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## ESSAY

# The invaluable weight of a mother's gifts

Moms give us life and guide our dreams. Four contributors to the radio series This I Believe describe how

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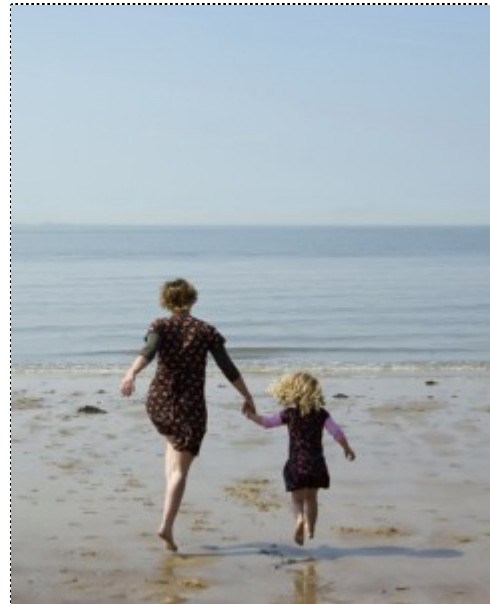
### A saving love

AS A CHILD, I did not have the love of my biological mother. Everything in life seemed dark and indifferent to me. I allowed hatred and bitterness to dictate my actions. For 15 years, my life was a fight to survive, and I was a product of these dark emotions that tormented me daily. After 15 years of violence, abuse, and poor decisions, I surrendered my independence to the civil authorities who were in charge of keeping abused children.

I met the mother who would show me a real mother's love in the county orphanage. She walked up to me and only asked if I wanted to leave the orphanage and live with her family. Although I could see love in her face and actions, my only thought at the moment was getting out of that place and isolating myself from others. After the hurt that I had experienced, I did not trust anyone. I had no concerns for the thoughts, feelings, or emotions of others.

Later, I would discover that my new mother's decision to take me into her home was more than a physical act of compassion. She called it a spiritual duty. Her actions proved that claim, and my hardened exterior began to soften. She lived her life before me with power. On many occasions I witnessed her prepare food for people who'd lost loved ones. She also prepared and took food to people who had no food. I have never forgotten these acts of kindness. Although her duties never seemed to cease, she relentlessly set before me an example of love that changed my life forever.

My mother never acknowledged any difference between her daughters and me, her foster son. I can remember many evenings when she would come home tired from working as a registered nurse at the local hospital. She never failed to cook our supper or get us ready for



The relationship between a parent and child is of unparalleled importance. *Photo: Mischa Keijser/cultural/Corbis*

school the next morning. When we were sick, she never abandoned us. She worked every day to make our lives better. I never witnessed such love and compassion in a person. The way she lived her life before me allowed me to turn away from the bitterness and grudges that made my world so dark.

I know that many mothers have contributed to influencing their children in a positive manner, but my foster mother had a tougher task, and precious little time to accomplish it. She had to strip away the darkness that 15 years of hatred had produced. She had to teach me how to love myself before I could love others. She accomplished her task, and my life today is a testimony to her devotion, faith, and character.

I believe a mother's love has no boundaries. I know firsthand that it has the power to change lives. A mother's love can overcome hatred, animosity, and selfishness. It has the power to heal an abused heart and body. I can attest this to be true, because it was a mother's hatred that made me bitter, but another mother's love that saved me from self-annihilation. — *Bruce Rankin*

### **The guardian**

I BELIEVE IN my 3-year-old son, who is not in the 95th percentile of anything, who did not know his alphabet by his first birthday, who is struggling mightily with shoes and the potty and most social graces. He is truly mournful when leaves fall off the trees in autumn, and he is as gentle and weird and kind as I'd dreamed my child would be. He does not know a second language yet, but he has a magical belly laugh. I believe if I could play a recording of it to warring nations, he would be heralded as an international peacekeeper.

When I was a child in the 1970s, children were woefully unfashionable. Yet, in retrospect, that decade may have been the last time children were allowed some breathing space. We didn't have to dwell so much on adult preoccupations of trends, fashion, and getting ahead. We could just be children.

This is why I so fiercely guard my son's youth. I understand that the push for achievement and the pressures we face as parents can be overwhelming. But I believe that I would be robbing my child of an essential gift if I didn't nurture and protect his youth. The world of playtime and the outdoors is the best laboratory available to my son.

Last week, we were at the playground when I heard a freckled girl in pull-ups call out to her mother from the top of the slide, asking for juice. "Ask me again in French," said her mother. The girl complied with an impatient eye-roll. At that moment, all I could feel was worry for my child, who is still just getting his feet wet in English.

But then I heard my son laughing. He was watching two squirrels chase each other up and down and around a maple tree. "Squirrels are silly," he said.

Motherhood is a state of always being vulnerable to our expectations and worries about our children. I know that at his core, my son is a happy, free-spirited boy having the childhood he deserves. When I am at my best, I know that there is absolutely nothing to worry about. So at that moment, I forgot about his French-speaking peer and picked my son up, nuzzling

those delicious, satiny cheeks, and said, "Yes, squirrels are silly." — *Marla Rose*

### **A woman's courage**

MY MOTHER WAS a single parent in the war-torn country of Vietnam, struggling to raise two little girls and care for an aging mother. Hers was a typical story of a woman's dilemma in an impoverished land brought about by years of civil war. But she was different because she had the courage to make a decision that would change all our lives. Through various connections, she was able to get us passage on a small fishing boat. The plan was to get to the closest country that had diplomatic ties with the United States, where we would apply for political asylum. It was a dangerous plan, one that many had attempted and failed. And those who failed paid with their lives.

My grandmother urged my mother to leave her kids behind. She explained that it was not wise to risk the lives of everyone in the family on the open sea. My mother, always stubborn, had made up her mind. She would not part from us. She vowed that in death as in life, we would remain together. My grandmother stayed behind.

We tried three times to leave before we finally made it to international waters. While cruising in the open ocean, we encountered a pirate ship. By luck and the skill of our captain, we were able to outmaneuver our pursuer. We landed on Malaysia three days after we began the trip. We proceeded to poke holes in our vessel to prevent authorities from making us go back. We stayed in a refugee camp for a year, waiting for a philanthropic organization to sponsor our family in the United States.

We were given permission to enter the country legally as political refugees. When we arrived in the United States, our first meal was pancakes and bacon. To this day, I still remember that first American meal with fondness. We relied on the kindness of strangers — people who agreed to accept the responsibility of helping us get adjusted to life in the United States.

It has been almost 30 years since we made that journey. There has not been a day that passed when I do not think of the courage it took my mother to uproot her family and move us to a place so foreign that we didn't even know where it was or how to speak its language. It was her courage that enabled us to have a future better than what we dreamt of while growing up in Vietnam.

How do you begin to thank someone who gave you not only life but also a future? I hope that my mother knows it is her courage that I most admire and cherish. It is also a quality that I hope to have inherited from her. — *Lien Pham*

### **Call your mother**

I STARTED PHONING my mother in college when distance suddenly necessitated that form of communication. Since then we have been talking on the phone regularly, even though we now live in the same city. We've talked about life's big issues — should I leave a long-term boyfriend and move to another town? Can I be a good mother and work full-time at a job that I also love? When she and my father separated, our roles reversed for a while, as I listened to her questions and tried to help her articulate answers.

But most of the time, we talk about the little things. What did you do today? How is work? Are the girls well? In over 25 years of phone calls, certain themes have emerged. "Go outside and look at the moon, sweetie," she'll say over the phone at least a few times a year. "I've never seen it brighter." "I went to the Reading Terminal this morning; the peaches are in." "I'm so proud of you." "I love you."

A few summers ago, some friends from college got together for a long weekend to celebrate our 40th birthdays. One of the women had been diagnosed with cancer that past winter. Kerry had finished her chemotherapy; her hair was growing back in, and color was returning to her cheeks. Although she was a little more tired than the rest of us, she looked great.

One afternoon while she was napping, the house phone rang. I answered.

"Hello," a young girl's voice said. "Is Kerry there, please?"

"Hi," I replied, "is this her daughter?"

"Yes, it is," she said quietly.

"She's resting now, but would you like me to wake her for you?" I asked.

"Um, I'm not sure," the girl responded in a small voice that sounded as if it were about to crack. I knew immediately that waking her mother was what she really wanted me to do even if she couldn't say it. She needed to talk to her mother, to hear her soothing, reassuring voice on the other end of the phone.

So wake Kerry I did. She sprang out of bed and went outside with the phone. For about an hour, she sat on an old log in the lengthening shadows of tall pine trees, quietly talking with her daughter — a 10-year-old missing her mother, perhaps fearful that she might one day be gone for more than a long weekend. I don't know what they talked about — maybe nothing, maybe everything — but I know how important that call was to both of them.

When I returned home from that weekend, I phoned my own mother. I don't remember what we talked about, but it sure felt good to hear her voice.

My two daughters are now old enough for our own phone conversations, and I cherish each and every one of them — even when they are about nothing important at all. — *Suzanne Biemiller*

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