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Dear Mom,

It has been 20 years since you died, but I think of you often. When friends talk about their mothers I retreat to a very quiet place that misses you terribly and wishes you had been able to be here to guide me through this rough middle part of my life. I was too young and stupid to listen to you closely when you were here, but now, as I'm struggling to raise my children well, I wish I could go to you for advice. I know you're here with me, in the wisest part of myself. If I can articulate my questions well enough, will I come to know your answers in my heart?

I feel most of the time that I'm on a tightrope, eyes shut, groping for the rope with my toes and just hoping, praying that I'm stepping in the right direction. I'm a family counselor, I've read every book that's come my way, I even teach parenting, but I'm still lost, still just feeling my way. Sometimes I think I 'know' too much - that I can see both sides so clearly that I can't begin to know which one is the best for me.

My two best friends have completely opposite views on parenting. One, I'll call her Ann, believes strongly that children should be allowed to be childish. She gives them very few responsibilities at home and doesn't get uptight about homework. She accepts raucous behavior serenely and creatively encourages her children to play. I think that's wonderful. Children need time and space to do childish things - so they can get it all done and not spend a lifetime trying to make up for a childhood they never had. Her children are creative and very spiritual. They can also get a bit obnoxious at times. But they have many interests. They read and are curious about the world.

My other friend, "Betty," believes strongly that children are like little sponges that need to be filled up as quickly as possible while their brains are working overtime. She oversees every aspect of their lives and fills them to the brim. They are in activities after school every day. She inspects their homework and makes them do it again if it doesn't meet her high expectations. I think that's wonderful. Children need strong values and encouragement to do their very best. Her children excel at school and at everything they do. Every once in awhile, when no one is looking, they do something truly awful or foolish. But they are extremely polite. Their teachers love them.

I'm ambivalent. I try to do a little of both and I'm afraid what I'm doing is not balancing, but wimping out. I'm trying to be a "Democratic Parent" - firm, but fair, giving responsibilities, but having play time too. And, of course, doing what both of my friends do so well - loving my children to distraction.

I wish my children were more ambitious - should I be harder on them, or easier? I wish they enjoyed reading more. I wish they could practice the piano without me sitting on the bench with them. I wish they would care more about the grades they get in school. I wish they were more creative. I wish I could let go of wishing they were different than they are and worrying about what they will become.

In my heart of hearts I think I expected that my children would be just like me. And I'm disappointed that they're not - or maybe I just can't see that they are. I'm after serenity here. But I'm afraid that if I really do allow myself to let them be themselves I will be abdicating my responsibility to 'raise them up'.

They are wonderful children, mom. You'd be thrilled with them. Each child has a startling and very vivid personality of his own. Each one challenges me in a different way. The oldest needs me to hang on right now, the youngest to let go, and the middle child needs me to help him find his place in the world. But even when I know what they need, I can't always follow through. It's hard to hang on to a pre-teen, it's hard to let go of your baby and it's hardest of all to find the time to really be there for all my children. Is there any way of knowing whether I'm doing this right? Does what I do make any difference anyway?

This tightrope I'm walking is between is the line between possibilities. There is no guidebook for our times. Am I the only one who feels this way?

Maybe the answer is that parents grow, too - that my tug-of-war over authority and acceptance, hanging on and letting go, being there for my children and having time for myself, is helping me to gain a wisdom I can't imagine now. In the end I will have to let them go. In the end, they will be finally and totally responsible for their own lives. And I will have an empty house to wander through, uninterrupted.

Would I have been better off not to have had children at all? Of course not. My children have connected me to the long line of human existence. They have fed me, filled me, nurtured me with their new life. And they have challenged me to be the kind of person they see with their eyes when they look at me. The problems, the stress, the worry, the guilt – they're part of the whole picture, part of life. My children will have them too. Oh, my darlings. If I had a road map, all written out in black and white, I would give it to them gladly.

Or, maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I'd let them find their own way. Maybe that's what life is – stumbling through, making choices, hoping that the seeds you plant will grow. And stopping, filled with wonder, to watch them when they do.

Thanks, Mom.

Love,

Beth

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