

MOMS AREN'T MARTYRS!

Let mom down from the pedestal: In praise of the messy, imperfect, authentic mother

By [Danielle Teller](#) May 6, 2016
Physician and researcher



I loved Mother's Day when I was a child. I loved it so much that I once gave a ribboned pot of wild violets and a big paper heart that said, "Happy Mother's Day!" to a childless neighbor. I didn't understand why she looked at me strangely until my mom explained that "mother" and "woman" are not synonymous. It came as a shock to realize that not all women are defined by their children.

I adored my mother and I adored arts and crafts, so Mother's Day was the perfect confluence of my passions. I eagerly watched her unwrap my little gifts, waiting for the smile that told me my offering had been accepted. I was confident that a macramé bracelet was the perfect thank you for the sacrifice she had made of her life, the countless times she had fed me, wiped my bottom, woke in the night to soothe me, the career she had forfeited, and the pleasures she had renounced. I had even added some rainbow-colored beads. My mother was touched by the gifts I made for her, and she was entirely devoted to her children, but she was often unhappy. She was brought up to

believe that good mothers live only for their children, and therefore, she did not have a life beyond us. This caused me to downgrade my opinion of Mother's Day.

Historically, children were expected to shoulder some of the burden of running a household or farm and take care of their parents in old age. Having children provided tangible economic benefits. Today, children are like helpless, altricial birds that can barely open their eyes or flap their featherless wings until their third or fourth decade, and then they leave the nest without looking back. There are no longer any economic benefits to having children, only liabilities. Therefore, to prevent its own demise through attrition, society had to quickly devise some narrative about the social benefits of parenthood. This narrative is epitomized by Mother's Day.

The bond between parents and offspring is not meant to be balanced or reciprocal, for obvious reasons. Our elevation of mothers to sainthood and admiration of their martyrdom goes too far in the opposite direction, however, imposing unrealistic expectations of self-abnegation on women and putting too little pressure on fathers, communities, employers, governments, and yes, even children, to do their parts. Mothers are encouraged to put their own dreams aside for the sake of the future generation, but after hundreds of thousands of hours of unpaid childcare, domestic work, chauffeur duty, and shopping trips, those dreams can slip beyond reach. Motherhood certainly offers rewards, but those rewards don't disappear because of state-sponsored daycare or when husband or child washes the dishes. If we allow mothers to step down from their pedestals, if we let go of the ideal of the self-sacrificing mother who lives more for her children than for herself, a lot of kids would have happier and healthier moms. If our society expected children to take more responsibility for their own well-being, we would produce more successful young adults as well. How did we collectively arrive at a place where women work full-time jobs and then come home to work a second unpaid shift of menial labor, while teens get to college without knowing the basics about [how to take care of themselves](#)

Mothers are not martyrs and children are not passive vessels; our society should stop pushing those two intertwined memes. Every Mother's Day, try and tell a mother you know that you appreciate her for who she is, not for the loads of laundry she has washed. And tell her children to pick up their own damn socks.