

The Tears and Joys of Motherhood

Dear Young Mother,

I hope you will come to look upon this page as your page. Write and tell me when you agree with me. And send me stinkers when you disagree! I'd like our conversations to be two-way. I am no expert on parenting but I do enjoy motherhood (exhausting and overwhelming as it often is) tremendously. I'd like to share my tears and joys with you. Will you allow me the privilege of sharing the highs and lows of your lives too?

Gitanjali Prasad

Motherhood: Is it for everyone?

The other day, I received two letters in the mail. One was from a friend in her late thirties who is expecting her first baby in the third week of June. As she has been married for close to fifteen years this really is a minor miracle and her letter, full of joyful anticipating struck an immediate answering chord of happiness. All her friends have waited for this announcement for so long that it's wonderful to share her joy now. The other letter was from a friend who's just stepping into her thirties. "I've still not made up mind about the baby issue," she writes. "I'm as uncertain about what I really want as my husband is certain that he doesn't want children." She is aware that her biological clock is ticking and that if she doesn't take a decision soon – it may be too late for her.

To read two letters revealing such a dramatic difference to the whole emotive issue of motherhood made me wonder at life's little ironies. And also whether there is any such thing as a right choice in a situation like this. Which would be more horrible do you think, to decide that you're happier as a couple – and then realise, too late that your life is incomplete without children. Or to please your parents and parents-in-law and society at large, you go in for a family, only to discover that parenting is not for you. The demands of a child clash with the pressures and goals of what was once an entirely satisfying life and you find that you are now trapped in a role which neither you nor your husband either enjoy or have any time for.

While both scenarios are sad there's no getting away from the fact that in the second one, an innocent child gets hurt. So perhaps if you feel strongly that you're not ready for a child, it may make sense to remain childless till you're sure you wish to take on the tremendous responsibility a child inevitably is.

At one time, not having a child was both sacrilege and foolhardy. Not only did most religions place great emphasis on the necessity of a son to conduct the last rites, and ensure peace in the after-life, a child was actually your social security. He took care of you when you were too old to take care of yourself. Today, happily, fewer enlightened parents see a child as a cheque to be cashed in old age. When I did an article on fathers for The Hindustan Times in 1985, one and only one father saw a child as a stick to lean on in old age. Most wanted a child to give direction, and a sense of purpose to their lives. And I must say that I was delighted to hear this.

Having a child is a life-long commitment. I'm always alarmed when I hear couples cheerfully state that they're prepared to put aside six months or one year for child rearing after which it is obvious they plan to step back into the exact same place in the rat race where they stood before becoming parents. I once thought that such a thing was possible myself. But it isn't. When a child arrives, he changes your whole life. And when he leaves your home to set up his own, he takes your youth with him.

Almost any one who has been a parent (in the real sense of the term) will agree that a baby turns your life upside down. Fastidious dads will chuckle affectionately over a cereal stain on their best shirt, house proud mums will cheerfully live in a house where crystal, curios and china are all placed at absurd levels out of baby's reach. A runny nose or a tiny cough will cause you to lose more sleep than you would ever have thought possible. Somehow share prices, golf scores and cultural happenings all take second place to baby's first word, first drawing or first full-fledged fight!

There's a whole sub-culture out there people aren't aware of. Parents of infants will expound on the exact progression of a baby's smile before he laughs loud. One demonstrates exactly how baby puckers his mouth before bawling. And parents of other toddlers will listen with rapt attention impatiently wanting to explain how that is so similar (or dissimilar) to their baby's action. Older parents (or parents of older children) will gravitate

together to discuss admission tests or what happened in craft class or singing class. And as they approach the teen years, parents consult each other for advice on how to deal with the marathon telephone sessions, the weird clothes and hair dos the children sometimes want to adopt.

Children can be enchanting or infuriating. But they're never boring. I'm sure a lot of us wish that the same could be said for the rest of us! I think it's important for all parents to understand (and this certainly goes for me as well) that this is the reward of parenting. We really shouldn't expect our children to look after us when we're old and for their mates to love us and be respectful. I'll confess that I wish for this with all my heart but I'm not counting on it! For to be fair, our children don't ask to be born, and they do give back in full measure the love that is showered on them all through their growing years – right there and then. I mean which mother would undervalue the brilliance of a 24 carat smile a baby flashes when his tummy's full and he is feeling snug and comfortable. Which father would downgrade the joy a smudgy, misspelt, get-well card a child lovingly presses into his hands even when comparing it to the healthiest bank statement or accolade from the boss?

So perhaps, the answer to my friend who can't make up her mind as to whether she should start a family or not is this: Becoming a mother means leaving behind all that is known and familiar and under your control, and embarking on a journey of which the destination is unknown and the terrain unfamiliar. It's a long, hard journey but the joys and the rewards along the way may be greater than any you have known so far.