

First steps

By [Martha-Lynn Corner](#)

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I've spent a lot of time as a mother noting my children's milestones. Oh, I think: he's climbing up that ladder unassisted. That never happened before! Or oh, how about that—she just listened to song lyrics, extrapolated their meaning, and ask a relevant question about them! (My children are four and six, so the milestones vary wildly.)

Then, tonight, I sat across from my husband in a restaurant. This past year has been very difficult for both of us, and has been its own sort of milestone, for many of the weighty and immense reasons that make adulthood complex. Differing expectations. Misunderstandings. So many feelings—some good, some bad—rushing in and taking up space and not always tended to in the ways they should be. Feelings that drift and pile like the laundry that will always, always be drifting in corners around the house.

A long time ago, in our younger days, things were more fluid and there were more choices to be made when life got difficult. There were options, maybe, things that could be easily discarded, horses to be changed midstream with few complicating factors.

But that time, I realized tonight, is long gone.

One thing we adults don't think about very often is that while we are raising our children, we are still raising ourselves. And if we've been graced with some luck and a margin of good sense and morals, we generally do an OK job. Still, time does its work on us. Bags of potato chips that once were eaten without a backward glance can add pounds it takes years to lose. Hurtful words sit and solidify. (Loving gestures do the same.)

I came to this realization today, eating a delicious vegan dinner in a stolen hour, after we gave up lunch breaks to leave work early and convinced the babysitter to stay late. I looked around at the youthful, unlined faces in this college restaurant full of microbrews and thought, "They're just children, aren't they?"

I was sad then, for a moment. Sad because the stress of this past year stretched so tight across my shoulders, and I saw the careless way the others leaned and laughed. Saw the relative ease before them, for just a little while, before these unaccountably beautiful hipsters all around us started solidifying on their own.

But I realized a few things, too. Some of the pains I live with are pains I chose, like childbirth. So many of these difficulties are just the childbirthing of a new era in our married life together—something we might call "middle age," though we'd balk at actually saying that out loud.

We've reached out for help and wisdom to help us navigate this stormy patch. Like children reaching for parents' hands, we've trusted the advice of those older, wiser, more sage than us—voices that have advised us to stay the course, to steer our ships with care, to work as hard as we can to continue to mesh and meld our paths even as storms raged in the midst. At times this seemed literally impossible. I listened to stories of Jesus asleep in a boat in a maelstrom and felt so far removed from this boy Savior. "Just like a child," I thought, bitterly. Sleeping while all hell breaks loose.

But maybe, I thought tonight, catching my husband's hand across the appetizer, maybe Jesus was doing more than sleeping. Maybe he was also trusting. Maybe Jesus was trusting in that way we all have to trust, ultimately, when we choose a life together over a life apart. Maybe he was trusting that rather than panicking or wailing or even working to bail out the boat, with some time to just sit and breathe and even fall asleep, things would take care of themselves.

I think this is the lesson I caught myself learning this evening, on this night when exhaustion shows up on my face more readily than my ability to hide it. When raising children is difficult and work seems impossible and home seems impossible and just every blooming thing on the earth seems made of a rock too slippery to scale, I have to look in the mirror and see myself and realize that as old as I am, I've never been this old before. I am still learning. I am still, in so many ways, raising myself.

It is in this way tonight that I claim to be a child of God. I claim this not from a place of warm blankets and ease but on the cusp of first steps, the edge of the diving board, the dark at the close of the light switch. God is waiting nearby, somewhere, ready to catch me when I fall. And just as certain: though by now I'm old enough to

know how very much it will hurt, and that I must bear the pain, I can forgive myself for tripping. I can forgive and laugh and reach out for the imperfect and beautiful hands of the imperfect and beautiful people around me and know that every moment is still, in its own way, a shining and incredible first.

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