

## A mother's vows

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I bathed my 10-and-a-half-year-old daughter and washed her hair for the first time in at least six years. Thanks to her broken ring finger on her right hand, and a midnight blue fiberglass cast that can't get wet, she needs help.

At first, it felt odd to me, cleansing this independent and maturing child of mine. The last time that I did this, her body was mushy with adorable baby fat, and the tub was filled with bath toys. There was room for the toys, after all. Now, not so much. When she lays down to rinse or relax, she must bend her knees to make room for her head at the other end. *How strange it must be, I thought, for her, in her nakedness, that I'm doing this.*

As for my daughter, her smile emoted contentment, and if she could purr, she would have. Her body, it seemed, remembered what it was like to have Mama bathe her, as I scarcely had to instruct her to make body parts available for the sudsy wash cloth. I told her stories of what I used to do during bath time when she was younger, and of how she responded. I even sang the song that I made up so that she (and later her sister) wouldn't squirm away as I rubbed lotion from head to toe.

I was amazed—inspired? touched? envious?—of her unflinching trust in me. Respectfully, I let her know when I was about to touch her private parts. She simply said, "That's okay, Mama," and allowed me into her most intimate personal space. What had I done to deserve this blessing?

*This, a voice whispered in my ear after my daughter had long been asleep, this is the essence of the mother-child bond. Memory, trust, authentic giving of the self, undaunted receiving, relationship, and of course, mutual respect and love. This, the voice continued, must be protected, cherished, cultivated, and held loosely. Grasp too tightly, the voice warned, and there is no flow, no freedom, and the essence quickly fades, for control is its antithesis.*

Whose voice is this? I wondered. Child me? Grown up me? Maybe both? Or maybe it wasn't my voice at all.

When my husband and I married each other, we made vows to each other. The pastors who married us, one of whom is my mother-in-law, required prior to marrying us that Eric and I knew what we were saying, and grasped the commitment that it would take to live into the words. The vows not only created and sealed our marriage, but set the course for how we would behave towards one another from that day forward.

There are no such vows for parenthood, save what parents pledge upon a child's baptism. Mothers and their spouse or birth coach can find a class for a variety of birthing methods, and their loved ones shower them with the necessities in preparation for baby's arrival. Books, articles, blogs, and women who have previously borne children offer advice and lessons from experience about pregnancy, labor and delivery, and nursing.

I'm unaware, though, of classes or counseling sessions for expectant parents similar to the ones that I've required of couples before I married them. As the young lives of my children pass before my eyes, I can see how parent-to-child vows and some solid discussions about them might have prepared me better to be a mother.

"For better or for worse, in sickness and health, for richer or for poorer, I will love you, truly with all my heart," would have grounded me far more effectively than did *What to Expect When You're Expecting* (although it's a fabulous resource in its own right). Faith in the One in whose presence I would have made these vows to my babies would have far outweighed the fear—the paralyzing motherhood fear that I'm not good enough of a mother, that I'm screwing up my kids, that I'm not preparing them well for the world. . . . I could go on.

I think what God gave to me this evening, as I sat on the toilet once again to bathe my offspring, was a glimpse into how I really am living into these vows, despite, or perhaps in the midst of my motherhood fears. I think what God showed me in my daughter's naked trust is that my lips may not have made these vows to my newborn infants, but my heart did. And the essence of the mother-child bond that I experienced is a manifestation of faithfulness that I didn't know that I had.

That was your voice, wasn't it, Lord? Maybe I can do this mothering thing, after all.

Originally posted at [Mabry-Nauta's blog](#)