

# Coming Home:

## STRUGGLING WITH MY MOTHER'S *Expectations*

by *Brette McWhorter Sember*

I am a second generation working mother. And to the horror, dismay and complete shock of my own working mother, I would prefer to be a stay-at-home mom. I find myself faced with expectations completely opposed to the ones my mother confronted when she became a parent.

My mother worked as I grew up, and so did her friends. Having a working mother did not seem to me to be unusual. I thought it was normal. Many of my friends had moms who stayed home and *that* seemed odd to me. My mother dismissed them. In her eyes it was a waste of time and intelligence. Why do one thing, when you can do two? she would say. I came to see motherhood as just one facet of a woman's life, not as something that takes precedence.

My mother has two successful careers, as a professor and an author. She is a woman who "gets things done," and to get things done, she believes one must have a career. She taught me to believe that taking care of children is *not* a career and that a woman needs more in her life to feel and be valuable.

*"I can neatly break my life into two pieces with my daughter's birth as the dividing line. Motherhood completely altered my goals and my outlook on life."*

My mother is a warm and wonderful woman who is very driven, and thus very successful. She is the standard I have always measured myself against. Yet, I am finding it harder and harder to live up to her and what she has accomplished. As a child, I never felt adversely affected or neglected because she worked. She loved me and she loved her career. Being a mother was something she fit in around her professional life.

When I was born, my mother had my father bring her typewriter to her in the hospital so she could get some work done. I couldn't

even read magazines in the hospital after my children were born! From the beginning, motherhood was not her entire life or the most important part of her life. While my parents worked, my two grandmothers cared for me. Unfortunately, this is an option unavailable to second generation working mothers. Our mothers are just as busy with careers as we are.

As I grew up, there was an unspoken expectation that I would have a career, an expectation I shared. I grew up with a drive to succeed. I believed that if I was going to be successful I would have to equal her accomplishments. I started taking college courses in high school and finished my Bachelor's degree in three years, meanwhile even managing to get married. I went to law school and planned a successful, high-powered corporate law career. Our daughter was born during law school so that those infant and toddler years would be over when I began to work and wouldn't interfere with my journey to making partner in a firm. I went back to law school six weeks after our daughter was born, but my whole life had changed. I wanted nothing more than to spend time with her. This was my epiphany. I can neatly break my life into two pieces with her birth as the dividing line. Motherhood completely altered my goals and my outlook on life.

My mother took a sabbatical to help me with childcare (demonstrating again how much she can accomplish). I finished law school. Next came the job interviews. I dutifully donned the navy blue power suit (that she helped me select and that she paid for), strand of pearls and moderate heel pumps, but my heart wasn't in it. I didn't want to work 50 to 60 hours a week for any of these people and leave my child with strangers. My mother told me that it's called "paying your dues," but it was too high a price for me. I realize now that I subconsciously sabotaged some job interviews. I turned down all the job offers I received because they weren't what I wanted. *continued*

The summer that I took the bar exam, my daughter started daycare. She was two. For the first two weeks, I cried each day when I left her. Things improved after that—I cried only if *she* did when I dropped her off, which was most days. I saw her for only one hour in the evenings that summer. It was my first and only taste of the successful attorney's work week. I hated it, but got through it somehow. My mother was supportive and understood the stress I was under. What I was doing was hard, but it was the "right" thing in her eyes.

I opened my own law practice and controlled my own hours to some extent. My mother expressed concern about how I would find clients and handle the work without a senior partner guiding me. She implied that this was not the way to have a successful career. She did, however, applaud my independence. My daughter continued daycare and then went to preschool, and I juggled my schedule so that I could take frequent days off and pick her up early some days. This was balanced out by night court, weekend seminars and incredible stress. I began to be and feel successful with my secretary, my cell phone, my suits and my full calendar. We relied on my income. I had a career and a family. I was a professional. I had lived up to my mother's expectations and my own. I was stressed out. I was unhappy.

*"I feel my son's babyhood and my daughter's childhood slipping through my fingers like sand and I want to close my fist and keep them next to my heart. I will feel more whole if I can give myself and my time to them."*

I wanted another baby. The stress of my job made getting pregnant difficult, but we finally managed after almost a year. I downsized my practice and moved my



office into the house in order to be able to work more easily after the baby was born. My mother was appalled. This was not moving ahead with my career. A home office is unprofessional and does not appear successful. What would my clients think?

I stopped working during the eighth month of my pregnancy and, though I'm past the six-week postpartum period, I haven't yet returned to work. My deepest, darkest secret is that I don't want to. I have spent my whole life striving for a great career. I grew up believing that that is what gives meaning and satisfaction to one's life. I have long been trying to fill my mother's shoes and I think I have now realized they're the wrong style for me.

Family and friends ask when I am returning to work. When I answer that I am not sure, they are not sure how to react. It is now expected that if you work, you will continue to do so after your child is

born. The presumption has shifted. For mother's generation it was the norm to home with your kids; now it is the norm to go to work. My mother was brave and independent and tough as nails. She was doing things her own stay-at-home mother would not have. She found her own way without her mother to guide her. I find myself in a similar predicament. I want what my mother did not have. Yet I feel I will follow her and her generation if I choose to stay home. I have a world of possibilities to me because of her and what I want to reject those possibilities.

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I have a constant internal struggle about where to go from here. We need the nannies. I know that I need more to think about diaper changes, dinners, blocks and B. But I want to breastfeed my son for a year. I want to be here to get my daughter off the bus each day after kindergarten and the grades beyond. I want to have a house that is somewhat neat, dinners that are thrown together at the last second and a room to play with the kids. I don't want to leave my baby with strangers while I go to work and worry about *other* people's children (that is the great irony: I primarily reject children in family and divorce court).

If I stay home I will forever see my son less than my mother. If I work I am following my heart. I will be the one to defend working moms; after all, I am the product of one and I think what my mother did enriched my life. If I work my children will not be irreparably damaged. Staying home is more about me than about them. I feel my son's babyhood and my daughter's childhood slipping through my fingers like sand and I want to close my fist and keep them next to my heart.

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I have learned important lessons from my working mother. She has demonstrated strength, independence and the drive to succeed. She has shown me how high I can climb and what climbing methods are at my disposal. I will forever admire her. However, I can climb mountains after my children are older. She taught me to be so independent that I want to opt out of the career battlefield. The independence she gave me is so great that I am able to reject her idea of independence.

For now, I will probably float in an unsettled medium of a part-time law practice and full-time motherhood. I will continue to struggle with the choices my mother has given me, love her for all she has done for me, yet follow the path my heart points to, knowing that my life is *full* of value, meaning and satisfaction.

Brette McWhorter Sember is a writer and attorney who practiced family law until her recent maternity leave. She enjoys cooking and reading and really hates cleaning. She and her husband Terrence, and their children Quinne and Zayne, live in rural western New York State with their golden retriever Ivanhoe. She and her mother are extremely close.

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