

Piercing

by Brette McWhorter Samber

Today my 7 year old daughter took another halting step towards womanhood. For months she has wanted to get her ears pierced, but has been uncertain. Today she announced she was ready. We bravely drove to the mall and did a few errands. She barely spoke a word. We headed for the carrying and jewelry boutique next. Suddenly, she needed to go to the bathroom. For the first time ever, she went in the stall by herself. I stood outside the door and felt the heaviness of the metal door between us, one that could only be opened by her. There are more of these doors ahead in the years to come, I thought.

Next we began the breathless walk to the store. She held my hand as we wove through the crowd. One of us was sweating. Once she sat on the designated stool, the tears began. They grew louder as her ears were cleaned and dotted with a marker. I asked her if she wanted to

leave and she gave me an unsure "no".

By this time a crowd had gathered - teenage boys to laugh at a young girl's fear and pain (is this the seed of rape?) and middle-aged women (caught in a spectacle of emotion more compelling than on their television). Girls and other women walked by quickly with only darting glances. Their lowered eyes said "I have been on that stool and



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know the contradictions you are living."

The crowd added to her terror. Finally after moments that dragged by like sandpaper over wood, two qualified(?) girls held 2 small metal staple guns to my child's ears and shot the earrings in, altering her forever. She screamed and cried "It hurts!" When she was shown the mirror to admire her two badges of womanhood she cried "I hate them! I'm not going to wear them!" I held her stiff body and paid for the event with a credit card. \$32.40.

We walked to the car and I looked at the two small pearls embedded in her formerly perfect, but now red and inflamed earlobes and wanted to cry with her. My daughter chose beauty over comfort and has begun to walk the High Heel Path.

Every few minutes I see her touch the foreign objects in her ears, ears that I grew inside me, with a mixture of wonder and pride. She sees herself in a new way. She has endured the ritual and her chest puffs out as she realizes she is a survivor.

Her new earrings are symbols of many things for me. They are symbols of promises I have broken to my child. I promised I would never let her believe her beauty came from anywhere but inside her. I promised myself she would never need to do things to be like others in the crowd. I also promised I would never willingly let her be hurt. Yet today I stood by as she had holes made in her beautiful body because she believed it would enhance her looks. She wanted this because her friends have done it. And she cried out in pain for something I signed a consent form for.

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But in another way, this event is a celebration for me. Because I want her to be a strong and independent person, I have allowed her to make her own choices and choose her own direction. I never knew how difficult it would be on a daily basis to teach us both that she could do so. The process of letting go is a long one and one I have only recently begun. First, I gave up control of her clothes - letting her pick what to wear each day

and eventually what to buy. I could visibly see her opinion of her herself escalating as she came to understand, respect and enjoy this autonomy. I still cringe at some of the choices, but I would rather she wear confidence and pleasure on her face than pink dresses with bows on her body.

Next she chose friends, music, books and activities. She learned to listen to my opinion, respect my rules and create her own world within those boundaries. I will give

everything to remain a part of that world.

Despite the fact that today she made another decision based on what she found to be right for herself, I am saddened. My daughter made a well-reasoned decision to endure pain in order to wear cultural markers of femininity. Today was but the first step. In her future, she may choose to wear dangerously high heels, harsh underwires, pantyhose that discourages breathing or even someday a tattoo, reasoning that the outcome justifies that pain. I am angered that our culture requires physical and emotional self-mutilation by young girls. I am angry that I have raised her so that she needs cultural affirmation of her womanhood.

My daughter, who is brave, insightful, funny, quick with words and love, alternately unsure and decisively definitive, should not need to be judged and evaluated by society.

I wonder as we walk if she will wear earrings each day of her life - changing them to suit her outfits and her moods. Perhaps she will, like me, decide they are too much trouble on a daily basis and keep them in a drawer to be used only as symbols of special occasions. Either way, this day will forever stay with her - and with me. She has begun to experience the personal costs of being a woman in our society. I am reminded yet again that motherhood is a crazy symbiotic jumble of joy and pain.



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