

Cross Trained

Running Toward The Blessing
When The Burden Feels Bigger

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Introduction

“The only thing worth writing about is the human heart in conflict with itself.”
William Faulkner

Is there anything more conflicted than a mother’s heart?

Apparently not.

It wasn’t so long ago that children were perceived as an ordinary part of most lives rather than *the* existential question of a woman’s journey. When we painstakingly plan exactly if, when, and even how we’ll give birth, it “inevitably endows the infant with a significance considerably greater than prevailed when parents had a half-dozen children, some at inauspicious times.”¹ I have a half-dozen children. And at least one of them was born at a rather inauspicious time (growing a baby at close to forty is a very different experience than doing so at twenty-seven). The timing of it all will feel even more inauspicious I’m sure when I beam behind my bifocals as said child graduates from high school.

As moms in the age of “helicopter parenting,” we’re shocked at how little our own parents worried about us. Facebook is replete with memes depicting life as a child in the seventies and eighties, chock full of TV dinners, moms who smoked, and helmet-less bike riding. Gasp! My own *tour-de-force* involved joy riding down a huge suburban hill, in the middle of the traffic pattern, piled three deep on a rusty, red Radio Flyer. That

¹ Senior, Jennifer, *All Joy and No Fun: The Paradox of Modern Parenthood*, New York: Harper Collins, 2014, 7-8.

particular thrill may not have been the smartest of my childhood antics, yet not a single well meaning neighbor deemed it necessary to report this incident to my parents. Not one. Today, if my five year old is *one aisle* away from me at the grocery store, no fewer than five employees—in full alert mode—will swoop in and begin the “do you know where your mommy is?” line of questioning. And I will be dutifully subjected to the mommy shame of almost allowing my child to get kidnapped. Again.

The prevailing wisdom back in the day assumes everyone was having fun—moms and children—and no one worried one iota about where you were until the dinner bell rang. Literally. My mom had a dinner bell. I basically lived at my best friend’s house down the block; her mom and the ever-eccentric Ma Ritz (I have no idea where her name came from) played backgammon all afternoon drinking Lake Minnetonka Bootlegs and smoking. Can you even imagine? But it wasn’t just the moms living it up: after a quick dinner of creamed ham on toast, we kids hustled back outside for “Night Games.”

“Free Range Parenting” isn’t a new thing: it was the *only* thing when we were kids. But our own children are just too precious for that kind of unencumbered existence. If you travel a little further back in time—even before my day—children actually helped on the family farm or at least did chores once in a while. Now, the postmodern child is “economically worthless but emotionally priceless.”² Ouch. That stings a bit.

² Senior, 10.

It's no wonder that family life is often full of conflict and existential angst. We don't feel we're parenting well if we don't belabor every possible decision. We remain troubled regardless of which we choose: Bottle or breast? Work or stay at home? Public or private school? Organic and grass-fed or just basic free range? We've imbued our babies with the power to make life meaningful or miserable. That's a burden our little bundles should never have to bear.

A mother's heart is conflicted long before she even stumbles over the real issue at hand: that love—the most natural thing in the world—doesn't always come naturally. There are days, weeks, and maybe even seasons when love—at least the way the world understands it—doesn't come at all.

Trained by the Cross of Christ

Enter Cross Training for moms. The Cross of Jesus Christ completely transforms us to love the way Jesus loves. Even when we don't "feel" it. Even when we'd rather be anywhere else in the world than in the middle of the exact place God planted us.

It is no accident that Paul tells Titus how the younger women need "to be *trained* to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands..." (Titus 2:4). I used to stumble over that phrase quite a bit, thinking how strange it sounded that a woman needed *training* in loving her family. Trained to love? Is that even a thing? How can you be trained in something that should just flow naturally from our hearts?

“Trained” is circled and underlined in my Bible because God has used it to speak a word of hope in moments of doubt about my feelings toward those living under my roof. Many years ago, I heard Greg Harris interviewed on raising children; his basic refrain was “train ‘em til you like ‘em.” That was a revelation to me. It’s a different message than “I’ll love you forever, I’ll like you for always, as long as I’m living my baby you’ll be.”³ I remember reading that wildly popular book to my children (*ad nauseum* in fact because they inevitably had a specific fondness for the all the books I didn’t particularly enjoy) and literally saying to them: “I *will* love you forever, but there are times when I don’t particularly *like* you and I know you feel the same way about me.” True love, as the Bible teaches, can be practiced even when we’re not necessarily hitting the like button on every post that pops up in our family lives.

Love is not easy. It is not cheap. It comes at a great cost. But it’s worth it. The love of Jesus Christ was displayed for us once and for all through His own precious blood, sweat, and tears on the Cross. Lots of blood. Lots of sweat. Lots of tears. We don’t get to love like Jesus without suffering—in some small way—like Him.

My husband and I got engaged on a whim. He was going to propose to me over the summer, when he drove me back from Dartmouth College to my home in Minnesota. “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails” (Proverbs 19:21). God’s purpose was to speed things up a bit. So when Eric got down on one knee, there was no ring in his pocket (and I still said “yes.” Now, that’s love!). My betrothed immediately set out to fashion me a ring at the jewelry studio at our

³ Munsch, Robert, *Love You Forever*, Buffalo: Firefly Books, 2004.

college. Let me be clear about this: the ring on my finger was made with blood, sweat, and tears. I could go into the gory details but I'll spare you; it's enough to know that literal blood was shed, real sweat fell from his brow, and genuine tears flowed from both of us. It's been over twenty years since then: we've moved seven times and have had six kids. More blood, more sweat, more tears.

“Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken.”⁴ It's in our brokenness that God trains us to love like Him. With Paul, “I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of this glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe...” (Ephesians 1:18-19). God's hope, His inheritance, and His power. These can be in short supply when we're in the trenches of parenthood. Yet under the tender teaching of Jesus, we are Cross Trained—literally trained by the Cross—to love like Him.

⁴ Lewis, C.S., *The Four Loves*, New York: Harvest, 1971, 121.