

What your mom wants (and doesn't want) this Mother's Day



The perfect Mother's Day is possibly an illusion, sponsored by Hallmark. Mother's Day can be like the scene of an accident, where speeding expectations have crashed into reality. My mother wanted eggs Benedict every Mother's Day, and I remember the many failed attempts to make her the perfect hollandaise sauce. When my sisters and I became mothers, our husbands used to get together with my father and make us brunch. They would shop at Costco and buy gallons of orange juice, pounds of bacon, dozens of eggs and mountains of breakfast pastry for the occasion, as though they were feeding the Green Bay Packers instead of us. The clean-up afterward was epic.

As mothers we treasure the handmade cards, the heartfelt poetry, the traced little hands turned into bouquets of flowers, the lopsided ceramics, the colored macaroni necklaces, the sunflower growing up out of the paper cup of dirt. But might there be more to the perfect Mother's Day? And has any mother ever actually had one?

I asked some friends who are mothers to describe the perfect Mother's Day. Mothers ought to be the experts, after all. But it is often difficult for them to consider their own desires because one of the rites of motherhood is realizing that a mother's wants come last. Maybe the perfect Mother's Day scenario eludes us because we are uncomfortable or out of practice at putting ourselves first. We understand that we have to take care of ourselves in order to care for others, but it can still be hard to articulate a yearning for the things that have become such luxuries.

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Some mothers of young children, those brave women still in the trenches, put forth tentative images of the perfect Mother's Day as a day off from children: hours of sleeping in, or a visit to a spa, or a glass of wine with some girlfriends. Then the guilt kicks in, and they hastily add that of course they want to spend the day with their little darlings, because they are the ones who made them a mother.

Mother's Day is a different experience for those of us whose children are adults. We never stop being mothers, but our children do stop being children. When we no longer see our children every day, when they are in another state or on another continent, Mother's Day perfection translates simply to their physical presence. We don't care about breakfast in bed or any other meal catering. Just being with them would be enough.

Like any holiday, Mother's Day can also be a painful reminder. This is my second Mother's Day without my mother, and so it is still odd not to feel the obligation to find a better recipe for hollandaise sauce. Or to be able to call her, or take her out for decent eggs Benedict, or give her a hug. The mothers that came before me in the generations of mothers are all gone to God, a thought that casts the sobering shade of mortality on this annual celebration.

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Throughout the month of May, I think of Mary, mothering Jesus all those centuries ago. I think of the verse from Luke's Gospel that made complete sense to me as my children grew and astonished me: "Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). For mothers, these moments of treasuring and pondering are profound and universal: how we treasure in our hearts the love and confusion and hurt and hope that our children engender in us; how we hold close to our breast so much that they will never know.

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I must report that in my unofficial survey of mothers, not a single mother I know mentioned any gifts as part of a perfect Mother's Day. As I tell my daughters, having such delightful children makes every day Mother's Day, and all I want on this particular Sunday in May is a nice card. We are suckers for Mother's Day cards. A well-chosen card can dispel our feelings of motherly inadequacy. Most of us mothers can point out things we wish we had done differently while our children were young and impressionable. Most of us hold onto embarrassing memories of losing our cool. It is lovely to know that our children think we did all right by them. A little appreciation feels good. It is better than any gift. "Thank you for everything you do for me, and for being the biggest nerd bomb I know!" one of my daughters wrote in her card last year, one of many sentiments I treasure in my heart.

Maybe the perfect Mother's Day is really a state of mind: the warm comfort of knowing that all of your little ones, however old they are and wherever they may be, are safe and healthy and happy and productive and loving and loved. The rest is icing on the cake. Speaking of which: Cake is always welcome.



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