



# I USED TO BE NORMAL

## ONE

Once upon a time I was a pretty normal mom. But that was before I ended up with 12 kids.

When did I begin to change? Was it with Number 3? Number 4? Maybe Number 5. I don't know. For a while, with babies arriving every 15 to 20 months, it all became a blur.

And yet at the same time it all became clear, as though I could finally see what was the important part of being a mommy. So many things I thought really mattered turned out not to matter at all. And so many things I hadn't thought of turned out to be the most important things of all.

Today I often hear, "I could never have a lot of kids. It's OK for you, though—you're so patient [calm, organized—whatever]."

That's not how it happened. I didn't start out patient, calm, organized, or whatever at all. Actually, it was through years of living with so many kids that I eventually became those things I might never have become otherwise.

It certainly wasn't because I'm anyone special. It was simply a matter of survival.

See, with one or two kids, your life has to change only a little. OK, I know what you're thinking, you moms of one or two—that your lives have changed enormously. But it's all a matter of perspective. Remember: I was also once a mother of one (for six years) and then two (for eight years) before my third child was born and the fun really began.

So I *do* know what it's like.

But there has to be a reason that every megamom I've ever met has said, "Once you have three, you could have 20—it's all the same," or something along those lines. And the reason is this: every mom with three or more kids has had to surrender, big time.

From manicures and pedicures (even homemade) to ideas of what constitutes a decent dinner or well-set table—all those things we thought essential to our worth as women are yesterday's news. Once a family's parental units are outnumbered by the kids, things just have to change. And mummies discover that the sooner they let go of some old ideas, the sooner the pressure and frustration disappear and they can begin to enjoy the job.

So if megamommies seem different, it's not that we're heroes. We've just thrown in the towel, too worn out to fight for our rights anymore. Patience, calm, organization—they're just part of our survival kit.

That isn't to say that everyone should have three or more kids. And I truly hope it won't scare anyone away from it either.

While hundreds of parenting books and programs out there offer to teach you a better way to raise your kids,

most of them fail to recognize that it's not just about changing your kids' behavior—or even their hearts. You can use all the strategies and methods you want to try to get your kids to change, but the bottom line is this: unless you're willing to change yourself, you're not going to make any progress at all. In fact, if you remain the same self-centered person (now calm down and hear me out) you've been all your prechild life—because marriage may give you a shock to your system but it doesn't hold a candle to motherhood—then you'll end up frustrated and frazzled. Yes, you may have some happy moments, but don't you want more than moments?

In *The Sound of Music*, after Maria has finally admitted to herself that she loves Captain von Trapp and returned to marry him and raise the children, the oldest daughter, Liesl, asks her how she can be sure she loves him. Maria says, “Because I don't think first of myself anymore. I think first of him.”

I love that way of putting it: *I don't think first of myself anymore.*

The whole motherhood journey—and now that I've been on it for 36 years, I really do think of it as a journey—seems mostly to center around that issue. Can I care less about myself and more about them? I know there are magazine articles and books aplenty urging you to “be kind to yourself,” “take time for yourself,” and all that—but I can't help but think of all the mothers throughout the world and throughout history who never had the luxury of even thinking about such ideas. Our culture has really cul-

tivated a sense in us that we're somehow entitled to excitement, beauty, fun, and romance long after we've settled into raising a family. And that sense of entitlement battles against the very real demands of raising children and raising them well.

The tender love we experience when we meet our first baby can wear thinner than we expected when that squalling bundle of needs comes up against our own self-centeredness, our desire for a good night's sleep, or just a little peace and quiet. Nothing can quite prepare you for that—nor for the loss of your autonomy. It's just gone. From Day One of motherhood, you belong to someone else.

What happens then?

In my near-breaking moments, I've always found it helpful to remember James Dobson's definition of love, that it's not a feeling but a *commitment*. So sometimes I may not *feel* very loving, but I'm *committed* to loving. Reminding myself of this, and many other things, has helped me survive as a mother and a human being.

So, yes, motherhood will change you—if you let it. And believe me, you do want to let it change you, because when you've refined the art of not thinking first of yourself, you will very much like the person you become. Plus, you'll experience so much more joy and satisfaction from your life with your children.

I didn't know this at first, of course. It took 36 years of bringing up 12 kids (and I still have six at home, including three we adopted) and more mistakes than I wanted to

make to fine-tune my mothering. But you don't have to wait that long or work that hard.

The bottom line is this: no matter how many children you have now—even if you're just expecting your first—you can use some of my survival tips to find the balance and joy in motherhood from the very start.

How I wish I had reexamined my attitudes about sleep, for instance, before my fourth child! It would have saved me a lot of frustration. Instead, I muddled through many demanding nights of feedings, wet beds, earaches, tummy aches, bad dreams, and sleepwalking (once the doorbell rang at three in the morning, and I opened it to find four-year-old Matt, who had no idea how he had gotten there), fighting for my right to eight hours of sleep or mourning the loss of it.

Now I know the meaning of sweet surrender. It's so much easier to be awakened at night if you never expected to sleep eight hours anyway!

And if you do get eight hours now and then, you never knew how grateful you could be.

### *Inspiration*

*The mother's heart is the child's schoolroom.*

—Henry Ward Beecher

*The art of mothering is to teach the art of living to children.*

—Elaine Heffner

*What children take from us, they give. . . .  
We become people who feel more deeply, question more  
deeply, hurt more deeply, and love more deeply.*

—Sonia Taitz

*A mother is not a person to lean on but  
a person to make leaning unnecessary.*

—Dorothy Canfield Fisher

*If you bungle raising your children, I don't think  
whatever else you do well matters very much.*

—Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis

*The phrase “working mother” is redundant.*

—Jane Sellman

*People who say they sleep like babies  
usually don't have them.*

—Leo J. Burke

*A baby is God's opinion that the world should go on.*

—Carl Sandburg



## MOMMY POWER

### What's a Mother's Work Worth?

On May 5, 2005, *USA Today* reported that Salary.com, a corporate compensation advisor, had calculated the annual value of the work America's 5.4 million stay-at-home moms do: \$131,471.

In their calculations, Salary.com used a hypothetical stay-at-home mom with two school-age children and categorized her work into seven main job descriptions: day care center teacher, van driver, housekeeper, cook, CEO, nurse, and general maintenance worker.

Salary.com assumed—get this—a 100-hour work week of six 15-hour days and one 10-hour day!

Well, at least they got those hours right!