

from the chapter of *The Invitation* "The Commitment"

And then I did only what truly had to be done to feed the children. I made sure they were reasonably clean and dry and well fed. I listened to them and let them know they were loved. I stopped trying to find a place where there would be no tension between my desire to work in the world and my dedication to my children. I started to look for and find a way to simply live with this tension, holding it without struggle or hope of resolution.

In the ongoing sorting of what really did feed my children, I had to accept who I was. In some places I could and did stretch, but I also had to accept my limitations and not try to give my children something I simply did not have to give because I thought I should be able to. Sometimes they were the ones to teach me what I could and could not offer them.

When Nathan turned five, he had a birthday party—six small boys racing throughout the house at high speed and volume for four hours. I tried to be patient. I bought all the right things for the goodie bags, set up pin—the—tail—on—the—donkey, blew up balloons, and baked a cake. I wanted to be able to do it. And I hated it. Several days after the party, Nathan came and solicitously put his small hand on my arm as I sat at the kitchen table. "Mum," he said, "you're not good at parties. I had a good time but I think from now on Dad should do the parties. He doesn't mind what boys do so much. It's okay. You're good at other things. But you're not good at parties."

Nathan could see and accept who I was more easily than I could. And eventually, most days, I learned to accept that all that I can really offer my sons is who I am. I learned to stop trying to be someone else, to trust that what I could offer them would be enough, would feed them. So, I offered them the things I know and love: poetry, ideas, prayer, and time in the wilderness.

But the fact remains that there are things that children need, things that feed their bodies, hearts, and minds, that we may not feel up to providing some days. As creative as we can be about finding ways to provide these essential things while being all of who we are, there are some days when—we must simply draw on something deep within us and do what has to be done, even though we do not want to or think we can. I once had a teacher who was very keen on always being "at cause"—being the sole determiner of one's own actions—and never being "at the effect"—having one's actions directed or curtailed by circumstances or the needs and wants of others. The first time I met him I asked, in all innocence, "How can I be 'at cause' at three o'clock in the morning when one of my sons is ill and I have to get up and look after him?"

He had no answer for me and told me that this was why he disliked children so much—because they were so needy. It was looking after my sons that taught me the answer to my question. In a culture that values individual freedom over all else, this is what we too often have lost, what we must remember if we are to do what has to be done for the future of our people without sacrificing our souls: how to surrender to doing what needs to be done to feed the minds and bodies and hearts of our children. And who are not our children? When we surrender, when we do not fight with life when she calls upon us, we are lifted, and the strength to do what needs to be done finds us.

It is easy to forget this, especially when we are weary and bruised through the center of our being

by life's disappointments, by illness or poverty or grief. And it is there, in that moment when it seems impossible, when we think we have nothing more to draw upon, that something else can enter, if we surrender to the tasks life demands of us. In this place, there is no more trying. There is only being and doing what needs to be done. We are "at cause" because we have remembered that we can choose to serve the only cause that matters: life herself. And in our capacity to do this willingly, when we get up anyway and do what needs to be done for love, we shine with dignity. When I see this in another I am filled with an infinite tenderness for our fragility and our strength.

I want to be with those who know of this, who have met within themselves the ability to feed the children when they thought they could not. These are the men and women who have, with great humility, tasted their own nobility.

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