

Parent's Point of View

Stepping Through the Glass

by Louise A. Blum

It is 5 p.m. at the Corning YMCA. The gym is a flurry of movement: everywhere you turn, people are lifting weights, pounding treadmills, rowing fiercely and going nowhere all at the same time. Their skin glistens with sweat. Each machine is equipped with its own TV screen. Everyone is in their private world, hooked in with their own headphones. Five minutes ago, they were someone else - corporate clones in jackets and ties, plant workers, teachers, doctors, lawyers - but now they are all the same: bodies that thirst for movement, minds that crave release. I find a vacant elliptical, select a program.

The glass wall before me looks out onto another world: the pool room, where kids splash through their swim classes, buoyed by multi-colored floaties and smiling teachers, shrieking with delight. Their faces shine with excitement. Lining the pool are the parents, who pace vacantly back and forth, holding their babies, distracting their toddlers. Their eyes are glazed, their motions repetitive. They are still in their work clothes, still sporting their ID tags. They probably just picked their kids up from daycare and now they're here. When the lesson is over, they're going to have to towel off their children and stuff them back into their clothes, drive home and get dinner going. This is a moment of respite. They are in the zone. If it weren't so hot in there, and if they didn't have all those other kids to keep an eye on, they'd probably curl up somewhere and fall asleep.

I remember being them. I remember looking through the glass wall into the exercise room, where I longed to be. Exercising, writing, finding time to myself - between parenting and working full-time it was easy to forget I used to be my own person, flooded with mission, filled with resolve. Whatever age my child was, it was all consuming. It was impossible to see ahead, to imagine life when she was older.

Or maybe it was just too scary. Maybe it's easier to sublimate your own desires, to lose yourself in the grease and grime and gritty joy that is parenthood.

One parent starts a conversation with another. This is the moment they've been waiting for. You can see it in their eyes. They snap back into focus. Their exhaustion sloughs away. They come alive. They cluster in small groups. They are hungry for conversation. They thirst for connection. They bury their need beneath observations about the weather, the work day, the plan for dinner, but what they are really asking is: How are you coping? That is what everyone wants to know. How do you do it? There is always the fear; they carry it within them like a second heart. It is always unspoken. Is it as hard for you as it is for me? This is what they really want to know. Beneath the façade, the makeup, the carefully done hair that holds up even in the steam of the pool room: Are you like me? Do you struggle like me?

I watch the action through the glass. I can see them, but I cannot hear them. But I do not need to hear them to know what they are feeling. I know the script.

There is a sudden flurry of activity by the pool. Heads lift and gazes focus. A child is having a tantrum. You can see that moment of panic in every face: is it mine? quickly superseded by relief when they realize that it is not. One of the mothers detaches herself from her group, picks up her child. His skin is scarlet with cold and fury. He throws back his head and slashes at her thighs with his feet, pounds her chest with his fists. His is the rage of the unjustly imprisoned; he arches his back, frantic to escape.

I up the resistance on my elliptical. Sweat beads up along my hair line, runs down my face. It is glorious. The mother carries her child back to the pool. Tears stream down his face. His whole body shakes with sobs. He is lost in his grief. His mother tries to give him back to the teacher and he instantly changes tack, clinging to her like a giant squid. One hand feels for the hair at the back of her neck, clenches it in his fist. The teacher attempts to peel him off, tentacle by tentacle, but to no avail. He is elastic. No sooner has she worked a leg free than it snaps back around its mother.

A hill appears before me; I throw myself into it, feel my quad muscles burn. Together the mother and the teacher work the child loose and he is back in the water. Momentarily distracted, the other parents settle back into their conversations. It's like watching a nature program on TV. Once the baby human is safe, the human parent turn away...

Not so long ago I was on that side of the glass. Not so long ago, it would have been my child pitching that fit. I would have been mortified. I would have thought no one else's child would ever act this way. I would have been racked by alternating terrors: either I was a disaster as a parent, or my child was secretly possessed. Either way, I would be exposed. Everyone would know I couldn't do this. I was out of my depth.

I check the clock; it is time for the cool-down. I drop the resistance and slow my speed. My skin is slick with sweat. My child is nearly grown up now. Fifteen years old and nearly as tall as I am, she is one room away in her cardio kickboxing class, venting her adolescent anger on appropriately padded targets with protectively padded fists.

We are both better off for the separation.

She is self assured and elegant. She has long hair that she straightens religiously. She applies makeup as if she were born to it. She gets good grades. She loves to dance. She reads voraciously. She argues with her teachers. She comes home from school brimming with information she cannot wait to share with me.

She is not possessed. She is fine. Thriving, even. Either she survived my futile attempts at parenting, or I was not so bad as I feared. Either way, we enjoy each other's company. We laugh at one another's jokes. Of course there are moments of adolescent hell, but it no longer stokes the fires of my dread. Instead, I see it as her job, to separate from me.

I could not have dreamed it would turn out so well. Nor could I have dreamed that there would be another life waiting for me after the heady rush of raising a child. For so long I have been a parent. It has defined me even more than being a lesbian has. Being Zoe's parent has been my identity for nearly a

third of my life. In a year she'll be driving. In two, she'll be gone. She'll go to college. She'll choose a career, find a job. She'll be a grown up.

And who will I be?

I will always be a parent. But as Zoe has come into maturity, so have I. I am 50 years old. This realization astounds me. I have been alive for half a century. I am becoming reacquainted with myself. As Zoe tries out new styles, so do I. My post menopausal self fascinates me. I have rediscovered clothes. I go shopping with friends. I follow my own life as if it were an unfolding comic book, and I its unlikely superhero. Who is 50 year old Louise? How does she dress? How does she wear her hair? How does she spend her time? I am nearly as fascinated by myself as I was by that newborn baby that the nurses placed into my arms for the very first time.

It is almost like giving birth again, only this time, to myself. As I grow older, as my mother dies and my daughter grows up, I am beginning to realize that in the end, I'm the only one I can truly count on not to leave.

Through the glass I see my former selves: the mother of the baby, the toddler, the child, the pre-teen. In this room, I catch a glimpse of my possible futures in the people working out around me. The white hair. The thin mouths. The wrinkled skin.

Am I crazy to say that this excites me?

The lesson ends. Parents gather up their children and wrap them in towels, lead them off into the locker room to dress. My daughter emerges from her kick boxing class. Her face is shining with sweat and something else - the sheer radiance of being. We link arms and leave the gym, mother and daughter. We walk through the doors and out into the gathering dark. The glass is gone and there is only us, in this moment, two individuals, stepping back into the movement of our lives.

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