

Confession 1

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO MASTER MOTHERHOOD

If you live in the dark a long time and the sun comes out, you do not cross into it whistling. There's an initial uprush of relief at first, then—for me, anyway—a profound dislocation. My old assumptions about how the world works are buried, yet my new ones aren't yet operational. There's been a death of sorts, but without a few days in hell, no resurrection is possible.

—Mary Karr, *Lit*

My first child, Patrick, was born eleven months after John and I married, and our second, Meaghan, was born just eleven months after Patrick. We had a third baby, Mary, less than two years later. By the time our eighth anniversary rolled around, two more babies had joined our family, Christopher and then Camille, for a grand total of five babies under the age of seven. Our sixth and last baby, Edward, was born one month before our eleventh anniversary.

Almost as soon as I became pregnant with my oldest, I quit my job as a high school religion teacher in order to be a full-time, stay-at-home mother. The switch from the life of a full-time teacher to a full-time wife and

mother was hard. Before, I had managed classrooms of at least thirty kids and delegated responsibilities in afterschool clubs, and now I changed diapers and fed babies. Before, I had attended meetings and strategized plans for student success, and now I meal-planned and folded laundry. Before, I had run clubs, sports teams, and classrooms, and now I lived a private life with my small children and daily chores. Who was I, now that I wasn't contributing something valuable and tangible to the workforce? What grand accomplishments did I have to share after a long day of child-wrangling and disciplining? When my husband came home, my reports included updates about organizing the pantry and keeping the toddlers out of the street (which is a heroic task, depending on the kid—let's be honest). As difficult as that work was, I struggled to see the value of my role as an at-home mother in the same way I was able to see the value of my work at the school. To make matters worse, I possessed a deep, unarticulated fear that I was going to be lousy at this whole motherhood gig. At work, I could measure success, monitor accolades, and excel at the tasks I was given, assuming I put in the hard work and effort.

Mastering motherhood was a complete mystery to me.

I wanted to be a perfect parent, a model of mothering, but how did I make that dream a reality? I loved my posse of little people but struggled with the demanding nature of parenting them. Their care and feeding day in and day out was exhausting, and their constant demands forced me to face my weaknesses. While I never would have described myself as selfish before I had kids, I couldn't deny that fact after. A ticker tape of script ran through my brain all day, reflections on

the frustrating conundrums I faced as a parent to many little people:

- *Can't you just leave me alone while I pee in peace?*
- *Who cares if the pretzel stick is broken? It still tastes the same!*
- *For the love of all things good and holy, please don't put beads up your sister's nose!*

I was never the poster woman for serenity before I had children, yet the perpetual squabbles among my children, combined with their many demands, exacerbated my impatience. I was both shocked and humbled at how easy it was to feel anger at a small child who had little to no self-control. Parenting challenged me in a way nothing else had. I couldn't escape my imperfections even when I wanted to. Those weaknesses were there before my eyes—and the eyes of my children—all day long.

Another aspect of mothering that challenged me, in a way I could not have foreseen prior to becoming a parent, was all the pressure to make the *right* decisions for my children. From the moment they were born I had to have thoughts and opinions about what would be best for my babies. As soon as the nurse placed Patrick into my arms, I needed to know whether he would take a pacifier, breast or bottle feed, or use cloth or disposable diapers. There were so many decisions it was mindboggling. Moms want to be informed and do what is best for their children, but for me, the need to have a plan about the smallest of details produced overwhelming waves of anxiety.

Like all new parents, I was vulnerable because I didn't have any parenting perspective. I didn't know what I thought about pacifiers (now I know they are

latex lifesavers) or disposable diapers (thank goodness for the genius who thought them up) or what would work best for my individual children, so I was quite susceptible to all the latest fads, opinions, and expert advice. The books and the blogs held the truth to everlasting Catholic parenting life—or at the very least offered me tips for getting my kid to quit wetting the bed. Since I wanted to do everything right in my job as a parent, I often sought advice when I should have trusted my instinct. Worse yet, I felt like a complete failure when, for whatever reason, I couldn't follow the suggestions of experts.

It didn't take much for me to feel like a failure, especially if all my friends were able to practice a parenting method I desired but couldn't implement. For instance, every Friday for many years, I participated in a playgroup with some of my closest mom friends and their small children. Each week we'd meet for coffee and donuts, pray the Rosary, and then share parenting strategies, prayers, and support. We had all read a book together on attachment-parenting practices; the book recommended an immediate responsiveness to an infant's needs and continual physical touch between parent and child for most of the day. The author proposed nursing an infant on demand and co-sleeping as a surefire method to ensure proper bonding between baby and mom. Most of us believed this was *the* Catholic way to parent, and we were eager to put the techniques from the book into practice.

The problem was that, unlike the other moms in the playgroup, I had two small babies who were eleven months apart, which made it almost impossible for me to wear both children simultaneously. It was also difficult for me to wear one of them at a time because, if I

did, I had trouble bending down to tend to the needs of the other child, or the child who wasn't strapped to me would wail because they weren't being held.

As far as co-sleeping was concerned, I couldn't wrap my head around that logistical nightmare. Imagine what our bed would have looked like if we co-slept with our infant and our eleventh month old! Who would sleep? The children perhaps, and maybe John, but certainly not me. In order to survive and be somewhat coherent during the day, everyone needed to be well rested in order to function to the best of our abilities. Once my babies were old enough to refrain from eating all night long, I trained them to sleep through the night. My decision to do so, one made considering the best interests of everyone in my family, produced anxiety and guilt, particularly when I heard other moms talk about what they were doing. In my circles, we all agreed that the "appropriate" way to parent, the one best for the mother and child, was to co-sleep and nurse on demand. However, given the nature of my life with two babies under a year, I couldn't justify that approach. It didn't work for us. Yet I still felt like a complete failure, even though my children's needs *were* being met and we were all catching enough shuteye, at least most of the time.

On top of feeling like a failure when I couldn't adopt "best" parenting practices, I was harsh with myself for things outside my control. The way I silently spoke to myself throughout the day dripped with a relentless critique of my performance; I wouldn't talk to my worst enemy the way I talked to myself. I remember once after a morning of excursions with my two oldest, just toddlers at the time, we came home and the kids were in meltdown mode because they were hungry and tired. I felt terrible for them. Amid their wailing and gnashing

of teeth, I frantically pulled out cheese, meat, crackers, and fruit and put them on little plates for the kids. The entire time I worked I internally critiqued my poor use of time and my inability to tend to my children's needs well.

I filled most of my days with silent commentary on my parenting performance and rarely, if ever, did I make the grade. The errands we ran on the morning my kids had the meltdown were not superfluous. I took the children grocery shopping, and while we were gone the kids became overtired and hungry. It happens when dealing with small children. Yet I blamed myself and believed their emotional states were a direct result of my poor parenting.

Shortly after the morning of toddler meltdowns, I attended spiritual direction with a priest friend. Through tears, I relayed all the ways I was "failing" as a mom. When I finished my litany, Father looked at me, puzzled, and said, "Colleen, did you think you were going to be a perfect parent?"

It was a rhetorical question, so I didn't have the chance to answer out loud, but silently I screamed, *Yes!* Father could see, after just five minutes of talking with me, that I had set completely unrealistic standards for myself.

But I couldn't see it yet.

Failure wasn't an option to me. I had too much at stake—my pride and ego, for starters, but also the lives of my children. I refused to repeat the generational sin of the past, and it was my job to eradicate that blemish from our family history. A *laissez-faire* approach to parenting wasn't going to work. It was get it all right *or else*.

My constant evaluation of my failure to make the parenting grade kept me joyless and frustrated. By the

time I had my fourth baby, I became easily angered over random, irrational things and often lashed out at John, our children, or the clerk at the grocery store. Once I calmed down, I had trouble articulating why I was upset in the first place. John and I would have a fight, and, since neither of us had the tools to communicate effectively, we'd walk around the house in stone cold silence for days or even weeks until one of us apologized. I would lose my patience with one of the kids because they did something normal and kid-like, but the fact I lost my patience at all was so devastating to me I couldn't forgive myself. I would berate myself for my perceived failures—my messy house, my ill-behaved children, my tense marriage—all day, every day. I was overly involved in service work, which did little to renew me personally and left me feeling drained. I was stuck in a series of unhealthy friendships where others didn't know the real me. I listened to the struggles of everyone else—their marital issues and time management and parenting problems—while my own life was falling apart.

I drove myself to keep a perfect house, be a perfect Catholic, look perfect, and maintain perfect familial relationships, and it was all a lie. Nothing was perfect, least of all me. The ruse all came crashing down one day in a moment so profound it would shift and ultimately begin to heal my crippling compulsiveness.

Face-to-Face with Parenting Failures

I was spending an afternoon right after my fourth child was born catching up on laundry, bills, cleaning, and cooking, while my two older children, Patrick and Meaghan, were at school, when the phone rang. My instinct told me to ignore it. I answered anyway and for the next

forty-five minutes was bombarded with a list of responsibilities and to-do items for a volunteer church ministry.

As I “chatted” with the caller, I watched my three-year-old, Mary Bernadette, unearth a container of small 8,500 multi-colored plastic fuse beads clearly marked “Not for children age three or younger,” climb onto the kitchen table, and get to work. When she began using the beads and corresponding pegboards to make a cat, I thought she could handle the project. However, Mary Bernadette quickly tired of the tedious bead pegging activity because, really, placing food grade plastic onto animal shaped boards is only *just* so fun.

She got more creative.

She stuck her chubby hand deep into the bead bucket and brought out a fistful of beads. I could see the wheels in her little toddler brain working overtime. *Hmmm*, she wondered, *what will happen if I do this?*

She stood up on the kitchen table and slowly opened her hand, watching those beads fall away like sand through a sieve. The beads bounced off the table; a rainbow of red, green, blue, orange, and purple showered the floor. They flew under the couch and into the crevices of my floorboards. Everywhere I looked was covered with multi-colored plastic.

This new experiment delighted her and her desire for greater bead-tossing creativity grew. Again she dug deep in the bucket and this time when she came up, both hands were filled with beads, which she again dutifully dropped onto the floor and table. I tried to get off the phone, but the caller kept speaking, and because I didn’t want to be rude, I made a catastrophic decision—I didn’t hang up. This story ends with Mary Bernadette, in complete and utter toddler delight, hurling the entire bucket filled with 8,500 beads into the air. The beads flew in

every direction and left me with a hot, multi-colored, plastic mess.

All parents sometimes lose patience with their children. It happens to the best of us. But the way I reacted to Mary Bernadette after I finally got off the phone wasn't just a weak moment. I felt out of control, capable of hurting her, and it scared me. Despite my actions, I wasn't angry that Mary Bernadette had spilled 8,500 beads all over the floor, or even at my new to-do list for our parish. I was actually angry about a whole host of unresolved issues that kept bubbling to the surface while I kept trying to push them down.

The first step in the Twelve Step program as outlined in *Alcoholics Anonymous* states, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable."¹ While I wasn't an alcoholic, I knew alcohol was still very much affecting my life. In that moment, it was obvious my life had become unmanageable. I loved my husband and children very much, but I recognized it wasn't enough for me to love them. I needed healing from past wounds stemming from my dad's alcoholism, and I needed to examine the wicked streak of perfectionism I possessed, which motivated me to attack life with such intensity. I needed to know how to manage my emotions better so I wouldn't flip out when my children threw buckets of beads all over the place. I needed to know how to respond to my family members as individuals and give them what they needed—including boundaries, time, attention, and personal space. I needed to develop a different set of relational skills with John, especially when it came to resolving marital issues. In short, I had to learn how to manage myself and quit trying to manage everyone else.

That afternoon, I picked up the phone and called a counselor. I knew it was time to examine what was at the root of this incident and of my other struggles as a wife and mother, so I could be better for my family. I didn't have the proper emotional tools to deal with life, and I knew I needed someone to help me develop the right ones, so I called a Catholic therapist and began to see him regularly.

In the years that followed, I sought counsel from this person who educated and directed me on the right course of action—right given my personal history, temperament, and life situation. Piece by piece we talked about the elements of my life that weren't working—my marital issues, parenting struggles, and relationship challenges—and then we outlined avenues to change. Then I implemented those changes as best I could. Counseling helped me to begin to let go of the notion that I had to do everything right or doom all of us to failure. I started to understand sometimes a good enough approach rather than a perfect one was just that: good enough. The emotional work necessary in counseling was hard, but it put me on the path to healing and freedom.

Accepting Myself as I Am

When I first arrived at his office, my counselor asked me a series of questions to assess how he could best help me. Throughout our work together, I noticed his questions always prompted self-reflection, which helped me know myself in new ways. I felt desperate, distraught at my unpredictable sweeps of emotions, so I didn't hold back when he gently probed me about why I reacted to certain people or situations in the ways I did. I didn't want