

By the time you read this, Mother's Day will have come and gone. As I write, it's still a couple of days away, and I'm doing what I do best – endlessly (and, I fear, pointlessly) contemplating something everybody else *just gets on with, already*. Motherhood today.



I've had plenty of extra-curricular opportunities to exercise my mother love this week. My six-year-daughter had a key role in her school play Tuesday night (that of "The Largest Mouse"), and will perform in her spring dance recital tonight. It's been a crazed week, what with all the driving, dress rehearsing, bobby-pinning, lip sticking, flower-buying and general rushing about. We moms cheerfully endure this prolonged mania for that brief, transcendent moment when our children stand on stage, casting their singular radiance upon the world at large... and no one notices, 'cause they're all looking at their singularly radiant offspring.

After Amelia's school play Tuesday night, her class lined up on bleachers and sang a few songs that were heart-breakingly old-fashioned, with lyrics like "Moms are special..." I sat there, all teary-eyed, with my friend Louise, whose son (The Red Fox) was standing next to my daughter (The Largest Mouse), and we marveled, together, over how wonderfully sweet they looked up there. Such innocence, such simple joy on their faces. Some of the songs had hand gestures to go with them – American sign language, I think, which I always find so beautiful. As the final song came to a close, and the applause began, I watched, mesmerized, as my daughter's childish hand motions morphed into – wait for it – hip hop moves. Suddenly, The Largest Mouse (complete with pink nose and whiskers) was doing *High School Musical*. Her hips began to sway, her head to bob, and her whole face took on an expression of... knowingness? It happened in a flash, was over almost before it started, and I'm sure no one noticed but me. (After all, they were looking at their kids.) But this strange little incident – this sudden burst of tween spirit from my first grader – rocked me a bit. It shouldn't have, I guess... Amelia's jazz class is dancing to a song from

*High School Musical II*

in tonight's recital, and she watches the movie... um, often. But it was just another jarring reminder that, in 2008, children grow up so much faster than we did. Innocence and experience literally overlap in kids these days, with experience winning out all too soon.

As a mother, I'm torn between a desperate desire to protect my daughter from a popular culture gone awry, and the creeping knowledge that I *can't* protect her completely, and probably *shouldn't*. This *is* her culture, after all; the one I brought her into; the one she's growing up in. It's within this culture that she'll find her favorite songs and favorite books and favorite movies... that she'll forge her memories and mark the milestones of her life. Unless I'm prepared to whisk her off to some far away mountaintop – devoid of TV, movies, music, magazines, computers, etc – the best I can do is hold her hand, while she'll still let me, and walk through the culture with her. (Which is why I, too, have more than a passing familiarity with

*High School Musical*.

)

Unfortunately, there are some high profile mothers out there, lately, who seem more concerned with their own happiness – and *fabulousness* – than with protecting their children. I wonder about the example they set for all the regular moms – and kids – who look up to them. Not to mention their own kids.

Take Madonna, for instance. (Seriously, won't somebody please take her, already?) According to *Huffington Post* – which even offers the naughty pics to prove it – Madonna, age 50, has bounced back from her stuffy, quasi-religious, genteel-lady-of-the-manor phase with aplomb, and is now gamely French kissing young girls on stage again (remember Britney?) when not cavorting in videos with their ex-boyfriends (like Justin Timberlake). Seems it's bye-bye kabbalah, hello Hot Mama. That's all well and good for Madonna, I suppose – her career, anyway – but I wonder how her 11-year-old daughter, Lourdes, feels about it? If she hasn't seen the pics yet, she will; she's a 21st century kid. I wonder how Madonna will spin it? As some lesson in female empowerment? Gay rights? Freedom of expression?

*What?*

What explanation could possibly make these pictures okay in the eyes of a daughter?

*HuffPo* also tells us that actress (and now *country singer*?) Minnie Driver is still refusing to give up the name of her “baby daddy.” (This is a term I've come to loathe, mainly because of its excessive overuse by the fawning media; they find these free-wheeling characters way more glamorous than *regular daddies*, who tend to be married to mommies.) Minnie confesses that hers was an unplanned pregnancy, but that she's absolutely thrilled about it. “It's something I've wanted to do my whole life; I can't believe I've waited this long,” she says, as if she might be discussing an upcoming trip to Tuscany. As for the unnamed father, Minnie says they have no plans to wed. “It's not important to me,” she shrugs. “I don't think a piece of paper lends itself to the idea of being a good parent and I want to be a good parent.”

Is it merely an accident of syntax, or did Ms. Driver *actually* just say that marriage doesn't lend itself to good parenting? Have we now moved past the point of “it's okay not to have two committed parents” to “it's *better* not to have two committed parents” when raising a child?

Listen, Minnie. I know this is something you've wanted to do your whole life – and a baby *is* a miraculous blessing – but it's not just about you anymore. It's about your child. And when you hold him for the first time, you will be slain by a love the likes of which you've never known; you'll also be overcome by an aching, bottomless urge to protect him. One of the best ways to do that is to make sure he has a father in his life. You can't know this now, but it is true, as sure as I live and breathe: that baby needs a father. If you can't bear the “piece of paper” – if it's just too bourgeois for your bohemian heart – then do something else. Just make it happen. You're a modern girl, so you probably think you have this all figured out. You've got money, so it may even seem

*easier*

to do it on your own, without all that messy relationship stuff. But you're not modern enough *or*

rich enough to outsmart human nature. Children need fathers. They

*want*

fathers. We're built that way. (I'd like to tell you that you will want and need a mate to help you raise your child – to share in the indescribable joy and pain he'll bring you – but I'm learning to pick my battles.)

Of course, even the most devoted parents sometimes get it wrong when it comes to protecting their children. (Especially when those children are celebrities.) Another recent example of a screwy parenting ethic was the “Cyrus Family Does *Vanity Fair*” story. By now, everyone knows about Miley Ray Cyrus and her ill-fated photo shoot with Annie Liebovitz. It’s old news, and wasn’t that interesting in the first place, and I’m bored at the prospect of even *thinking* about it again... but it *does* fit today’s lesson plan. So, in a nutshell: Miley went to photo shoot; Miley took off shirt, per Liebovitz’ request; sexy photo of Miley, bare-backed, wrapped in satin sheet, hit internet; mass hysteria ensued.

Lots of moms seem to be taking the Miley story personally, almost as if they’ve been betrayed – by Disney, by *Vanity Fair*, even by Miley herself. As for me, I don’t think Miley, or *Vanity Fair*,

or even Disney owe me anything – certainly not a forever-innocent Miley Ray Cyrus. The question I find interesting, though, is:

*What about what Miley’s parents owe her?*

Frankly, I’m more unsettled by the creepy photo of hunky Billy Ray and his lithe young daughter cuddling like a couple of lounging lovebirds than I am with the photo in question. What was *Mama*

Ray Cyrus thinking when that icky pose was conceived? Did she encourage it? If so, why? Annie Liebovitz and *Vanity Fair* delight in blurring boundaries and mocking conventional morés. That’s their job. Miley’s *mom’s*

job, however, is to protect her daughter. From being exploited. From being tabloid fodder. From being made to grow up too fast. But, that same mother is also her manager. Perhaps this was merely a shrewd business decision – a way to begin prepping Miley for a post-Disney career that could be even bigger than the one she has now... and more lucrative? However you ask the question, the answers don’t seem pretty.

In all three instances, with Madonna, Minnie Driver, and Mama Ray Cyrus, it seems mothers are putting themselves – their own ambitions and desires – before the good of their children. I know I do it, too, every day, in a hundred little ways. The truth is, in the face of our shifting social values, “the hardest job in the world” is more confusing than ever.

God help us all to be better mothers. And help us, especially, to know what better *is*.