

Nicole Graev Lipson

## THINKERS WHO MOTHER

The most profound compliment I've received in my ten years as a mother came from a bearded hipster in plaid flannel working the register at my local bookstore.

This was at the end of a Saturday morning spent carting my four-year-old along with me on errands. We'd made it through the pharmacy, the dry cleaner, and the grocery store, finally arriving here, where I could reward her patience with the purchase of a picture book. One grew into two, and then, *alright, three* – because books are books, and it's hard for me to deny them to anyone.

A purple paperclip holder in the shape of a cat is *not* a book. But the moment my daughter spotted this item by the register, she knew she had to have it. "Mama, look!" she said, her voice both grave and exuberant. As a mother of three, I knew this tone well. I piled our books on the counter, glancing down just long enough to make my decision. *We're just getting books today, Lovie.* I knew – because I know four-year-olds – that this conversation wasn't over. She tried insistence. *But Mommy.* She tried logic. *I really, really need it.* She tried promises.

---

Nicole Graev Lipson's nonfiction has appeared in *The Hudson Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Crab Creek Review*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Boston Globe Magazine*.

*I'll never ask for anything again.* With each attempt, I could see her body growing more rigid, her fists curling tighter. Meanwhile, the guy behind the counter had finished ringing up our purchases. Someone was waiting behind me. I grew hot under my jacket. I needed to do something quickly.

If this were six years ago and my oldest child, I would've caved and bought her the paperclip holder in desperation. If this were three years ago and my middle child, I would've resolutely reminded him that "money doesn't grow on trees," and he would have collapsed in a weeping heap on the bookstore floor. Today, I drew upon all my years of trial and error, of surprise triumphs and near misses and outright disasters, to try a third approach. "You love that cat! I can see why. It's really cute."

My daughter's shoulders lowered slightly. I had her ear – but where was this going? "Do you want to put it on your Hanukkah wish list?" I said. She didn't actually have such a list – I'd invented it this very moment.

"But you won't *remember* it," she said. "You won't remember what it *is*!" She was panicked, tense. It's taken me years to understand that the desire of a young child – no matter how trivial its object may seem – is as real and acute as any grown-up desire. I couldn't lessen my daughter's longing. But I just might, I hoped, be able to lessen her worry.

I took out my phone. "I have an idea. Let's take a photo, so you can know for sure I'll remember it?" This was a gamble. The line behind us was growing. But a tantrum, I knew, would be worse for all of us. My daughter looked up at me. She loves to see how my phone camera works, how the full moon circle makes the picture stick to the screen, and then live in my phone forever. I kneeled down and she came to me. Together, we held up the phone, centering it on the cat's whiskered face. She lifted her fingertip to the circle. The phone clicked, and she nodded triumphantly.

Behind the counter, the man in the plaid shirt slipped our books into a shopping bag, and then he uttered the sentence that would fill me with a deeper sense of accomplishment than any of my life's milestones, any of my academic achievements or career successes. "I have to tell you," he said, "how beautiful it was watching you handle that."

By the time I'd processed these words, my nose was tingling and my eyes were stinging, and it felt like something had cracked open in my chest. I felt such gratitude for this stranger, this young man in plaid, who'd acknowledged something in me that hadn't been acknowledged before, that I'd never quite acknowledged myself. I

could not have said in that moment what, exactly, this thing was, and why its recognition had touched me so.

"I wish I could explain how much that means to me," I told him.  
I am still trying.

It's commonly said that being a mother "is the hardest job there is." On the surface, this would seem the ultimate compliment, a signal that our culture values mothers and their work. But I've become suspicious of this type of praise, which – in a country that denies women adequate maternal leave, all but ignores post-partum health, and offers no systematized childcare solution – strikes me as inauthentic. I think of an archetypal 1950s father walking in after work while his wife pulls a roast from the oven and herds the children toward the table: "I don't know how you do it, Dear," he might say between forkfuls. "The hardest job there is!"

Platitudes like this link motherhood with martyrdom and sacrifice – characteristics of the idealized motherhood Adrienne Rich describes in her 1976 book *Of Woman Born*. When I picked up this book a few years ago, it was a revelation. Until then, motherhood had seemed to me mostly a life phase – one I experienced privately, in relation to my children. To read Rich was to watch a magician whisking away a cloak, revealing motherhood for what it largely is: an institution, and one whose rules benefit not women – or even, in many cases, children – but patriarchy. Our culture, she argues, has turned motherhood into a "sacred calling" that puts mothers on a pedestal, but in ways that sever us from our humanity, demanding from us "maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization." To fulfill our culture's idea of a "good mother," Rich shows, a woman must become static – a marble statue frozen in a pose of devotion.

In her essay "Maternal Thinking," philosopher Sara Ruddick pushes back against this version of motherhood further. Because it's so deeply associated with feeling, we "often remain ignorant of the perspective, the *thought* that has developed from mothering," she writes. Ruddick shows how a mother – as she nourishes and morally shapes a human life – engages in a "discipline," maternal thinking, that's as serious and rigorous as any "religious, scientific, historical" or "mathematical" discipline. It's no coincidence that these examples come from realms traditionally dominated by men, highlighting an age-old binary that privileges intellect over emotion, logic over intuition. Ruddick rejects this division, showing how intellect *and* feeling merge to fuel the work of mothering.

It might seem obvious to point out that mothering involves think-

ing. After all, mothers are humans – *of course* they think. But history offers many examples of our culture’s attempts to pit intellect against maternity, brain against uterus. After the 1856 publication of *Madame Bovary*, fear spread of a phenomenon called “Bovarysme”: experts warned that reading was becoming a dangerous epidemic among women, severing them from their natural female role. Because of their “lower brain weight,” doctors posited, women risked overstimulating their minds with books, jeopardizing their reproductive organs and fertility. In 1890, when suffering from what would likely now be diagnosed as postpartum depression, “The Yellow Wallpaper” author Charlotte Perkins Gilman received a similar warning from her doctor: “Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.”

It would be easy to laugh this attitude off as a Victorian relic if shades of it didn’t still persist. To be sure, women today are far more appreciated for their intellectual capacities – in academia, in the workplace, in public life. But when a woman walks out into the world as a mother, these capacities tend to be obscured by her overarching mother-ness – and the artistry and intellectual rigor of mothering are hardly recognized at all. Few works of literature explore child-birth and motherhood in their true complexity, or with the gravitas with which centuries of celebrated male authors have written about, say, war – or boarding school. The inner lives of women *thinking* through the morally charged experience of pregnancy and mothering are so underrepresented in the literary canon that this would seem a niche genre, like books about quilting, or lady detectives. And yet, there’s perhaps no experience more universally relevant: “All human life on the planet,” as Rich points out, “is born of woman.”

Maternal thinking’s most common modern showcase might be the “mommy blog,” a term that, in its cuteness, captures our culture’s infantilization of mothers, and its refusal to take our thought seriously. Advice books like *The Happiest Toddler on the Block* or *Moms on Call* – to name a couple on my bookshelf – do, in their way, treat mothering as a craft that can be practiced and refined, and yet they take as their basic premise mothers’ helplessness to tackle, uninstructed, the practical and moral questions of raising a child. Tellingly, the most revered gurus of this genre – Harvey Karp, T. Berry Brazelton, Benjamin Spock, William Sears – are all men.

In the early 2000’s, *Salon* housed a column called “Mothers Who Think.” Possibly, this title was meant to be a little cheeky. But in distinguishing thinking as something unusual enough to call out, it confirmed the *unthinking* mother as the norm. The fact that the women writing for this section were largely privileged, educated, and

white made this title even more troubling, suggesting that while some mothers – elite mothers – engage regularly in complex thinking, the common horde of moms out there do not.

I was a recent college graduate when this column appeared – single, childless, and thrilled to have landed a job as an editorial assistant at a New York City publishing house. Eating lunch at my desk, I'd sometimes scroll through *Salon*, passing over "Mothers Who Think," which seemed irrelevant to me. At the time, this title didn't strike me as troublesome, which reveals to me just how steeped I was in our culture's ideas of maternity. As an eager, career-oriented, young adult woman whose greatest passions were books and writing, I had no trouble at all conceiving of myself as a thinker. I'd been encouraged my whole life – by my family, at my competitive all-girls high school, in college – to be a thinker. But at no time had I been prepared to be a mother-thinker, or to see motherhood as a mode of thinking.

I had, of course, been prepared to be a mother, in all the ways girls are groomed to become mothers. But from my 22-year-old vantage point, the mother in me had nothing to do with the thinker in me – for as far as I was concerned, mothers operated outside the world of ideas and power, in a sealed, pastel kingdom of mobiles and lullabies. I might one day become a mother, but for now, the mother in me waited deep in my cells, a tangle of instinct and urge that would eventually "kick in" – presumably around age 30 – replacing the thinking, striving me with something gentler. This mother was a separate person from my current self, and like two characters played by the same actor, we couldn't be on stage simultaneously.

If this future wrecking-ball to my intellectual life concerned me at the time, it was only in a distant way. And in any case, once that baby emerged and floated into my arms, I wouldn't mind so much, surely. Surely, my subsumption into the realm of feeling would feel, once it came, like a delicious and powder-sweet surrender.

The only cultural touchpoint I can think of that connects mothering and thought is a demeaning one, and that's the term "mommy brain," used to describe the forgetfulness women with young babies sometimes experience. The indignity of this term has no bottom. A woman who has just brought forth new life – who perseveres through sleeplessness and extraordinary physical and psychic changes in order to study, understand, and nurture this new life – has as her command center something far more fearsome than a "mommy brain."

Over time, I've stumbled upon far truer representations of the

"mommy brain," which I turn to again and again. I am thankful every day for the poems of Gwendolyn Brooks and Sharon Olds, for the essays of Rivka Galchen and Jacqueline Rose, for the fiction of Jenny Offill and Jamaica Kincaid. How, I now wonder, did I make it through most of my adult life without reading Alice Munro, whose stories have become a ballast for me in the midstream of motherhood?

Munro doesn't just depict mothers thinking: she imbues this thinking with all the import and tension of any classic heroic journey. Take her story "My Mother's Dream." Told from the perspective of her now-grown baby daughter, this story focuses on Jill, a conservatory violinist and World War II-era bride, widowed during pregnancy. Taken in by her sisters-in-law, she spends the hours before labor ravenous and insatiable, an ungoverned creature who eats her way through the day, fueled by an "irritability amounting almost to panic that makes her stuff into her mouth what she can hardly taste any longer." This imagery is a far cry from our culture's archetypal mother-to-be, quietly expectant as she spends her final childless days "nesting."

Jill continues to stumble over motherhood's script. For starters, she utterly fails at breastfeeding, that consummate emblem of maternal achievement. "I screamed blue murder," the daughter-narrator tells us. "The big stiff breast might just have been a snouted beast rummaging in my face." The newborn daughter rejects her mother's milk in favor of formula, and her mother's arms in favor of the arms of Iona, Jill's nervous and obliging sister-in-law.

We all know – can all imagine – what Jill is supposed to feel in this moment. Guilt, failure, the piercing self-incrimination so many real mothers I know have suffered when they, too, have struggled to establish breastfeeding, a process far more complicated and grueling than any cherubic Renaissance painting would have us believe. Instead, Jill welcomes her baby's preference for Iona, which frees her up to turn her attention back to the violin. But in her first post-partum attempt to play, everything comes out wrong. Her daughter wakes crying, further thwarting her. The daughter-narrator reflects:

How can I describe what music is to Jill? Forget about landscapes and visions and dialogues. It is more of a problem . . . that she has taken on as her responsibility in life. Suppose then that the tools that serve her for working on this problem are taken away. The problem is still there in its grandeur . . . but it is removed from her. For her, just the back step and the glaring wall and my crying. My crying is a knife to cut out of her life all that isn't useful. To me.

Jill is conquered by a version of motherhood in which feeling and intellect cannot co-exist, and the overthrow is crushing.

I have lived this version of motherhood – can recall, in my early years as mother, a flattening of my creative self equally violent and complete. It's music that eludes Jill; for me, it was writing, the one pursuit that had ever anchored me, as inseparable from who I was as my body or name. From the time I could write, I wrote. Notebooks of stories as a child; poems as a teenager, scrawled on loose-leaf paper, or amassing in blocky stanzas on my computer; as an adult, mostly essays and other nonfiction. And always journals. Countless journals.

For nearly 30 years, I wrote. And then I had a baby, and I no longer wrote.

I don't mean that I wrote less frequently, or less prolifically. I stopped abruptly and altogether, as if a vein of my being had been cauterized. When friends asked what I was working on, I'd tell them the same lie I'd told myself, that it was "so hard to find the time with the baby!" Like most good lies, there was a grain of truth in this. Being our daughter's primary caregiver did shrink the time I had to use creatively. But this wasn't the full story. What stood between me and writing wasn't mothering; it was striving to mother perfectly – to become, fully and completely, that golden idol worthy of adoration.

I extended my leave from my English teaching job and reorganized my life with my daughter at its center. No store-bought baby food for my girl; instead, I stood for hours in my kitchen, fussing over pots of stewing vegetables, then ladling them into labeled freezer trays. No fitness center daycare for my baby; instead, I heaved her down city blocks during group stroller walks, straining for conversation with the band of mothers I'd fallen in with. I attended a playgroup or baby enrichment class every day of the week – and for a period of time on Thursdays, two playgroups in one day. I poked at Play-Doh in art class, shook tiny maracas in music class, read picture books aloud at the library until my throat felt angry and tight.

I became depressed. On the phone with an old friend, I cried out, "All my creativity is going into my child." Here, finally, was something closer to the truth. But it wasn't exactly creativity I was channeling into my daughter. Rather, it was a sort of frantic, white-knuckled enactment of the mother I believed I must be, an enactment that required nearly all my energy and will. To admit my writerly self into my motherhood was to jeopardize the entire fragile persona I'd created.

The mother ideal, I've come to believe, is uniquely insidious, because what we feel to be at stake is so precious to us, and so at the

mercy of our choices. For me, falling short of this ideal meant failing not just myself but the vulnerable human whose flourishing, I'd been led to believe, was exquisitely calibrated to my every move. Every part of my daughter's being – her petal-curved fingers, her warm bread scent, her breath against my neck – told me I had no choice.

I love "My Mother's Dream" because it reveals a pathway out of this black-and-white thinking. When Iona and her sister leave town for a night, Jill experiences a harrowing twenty-four hours. Her baby rages nonstop, entirely inconsolable. Symbolically, in the middle of this, Jill takes out her violin and attempts again to play. Any temptation to see this as neglect of maternal duty is complicated by that fact that the person most entitled to a claim of victimhood – the now-grown baby – does not. "In a way, she does me an honor," the narrator says. "No more counterfeit soothing, no more pretend lullabies or concern for tummy-ache, no petsy-wetsy whatsamatter. Instead, she will play Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto." Jill's daughter admires her integrity. Which makes me wonder: for whom do we perform sacred motherhood, if not our children?

Is Jill abusive? Negligent? Munro challenges such tidy conclusions. Even as she suffers, she continues to plod through the devotions of mothering an infant, warming bottle after bottle and washing her baby's clothes. Hammered by a headache, Jill makes a decision that should by any standard measure of a mother's goodness tip her into the category of "bad mother," and that is her choice to sprinkle shavings of her headache medication into her baby's milk. But this isn't a standard motherhood tale. When Jill's sisters-in-law return the next morning, they discover a baby who momentarily *seems* dead, but who – defying both narrative and moral expectations – is simply sleeping extremely deeply.

If Jill were a classic "good mother," she would not, of course, have fed her baby pulverized painkillers. What she is instead is a *real* mother, and in the fullness of her reality, there's space for imperfection. What's more, it's not instinct or a yielding to "sacred duty" that ultimately sets Jill on a sustainable path as a mother, but reason and will: "Sobered and grateful, not even able to risk thinking about what she'd just escaped, she took on loving me, because the alternative to loving was disaster," the narrator tells us. Mothering, like any rigorous practice, involves error, and learning from error.

As the story draws to its close, we feel reassured that Jill has found a version of motherhood more aligned with her truth. And what has this truth nurtured? Our narrator, her daughter, who speaks of her own imperfect, grappling thinker-mother with the balance, humor



and insight of someone who turned out well – whose mother, in the end, must have done something right.

Real life seldom affirms the thinker-mother in this way.

Looking back on my own entry into motherhood, I can see now how the world pressed its chisel to me, slowly sculpting me into its maternal image. This shaping began in pregnancy. As my stomach rounded, the world claimed me in a way it never had before. On street corners, I was smiled upon by strangers, bathed in almost overwhelming approval. At the high school where I taught, coworkers I hardly knew placed hands on the stretched-sweater of my belly, offering praise to the workings of my body. I was fulfilling my biological destiny, achieving in a way that was unambiguously good. The threads of my being that had formerly connected me to others all receded, replaced by the topic of my body and its incremental shifts, the nursery purchases completed or planned, the growing fact of my impending motherhood.

This shift went into strange acceleration when, at 22 weeks pregnant, I went for a routine ultrasound and was placed by my obstetrician on immediate bed rest. She explained that my cervix had “shortened,” something that often happens when labor is near, but my due date was months away. Shortening this early could suggest “cervical incompetence,” which could lead to premature birth. I didn’t need it explained to me that, at 22 weeks’ gestation, this was a potential death sentence for my baby.

My obstetrician handed me a gown. On the exam table, I lay back on the cold padding with a monitor strapped to my abdomen. I blinked up at the ceiling tiles, feeling as if my mind had been lifted and separated from my body. My mind was up there in those tiles, irrelevantly floating, and down below was my body, its vagaries and fluctuations holding me at their mercy.

That morning, I’d been the chair of a high school English department, in charge of a cadre of teachers and three classes of students. Now, I was a vessel charged with keeping from cracking open. Sent home to my apartment, I saw the agenda for my next department meeting sitting absurdly on my desk; a half-written lesson plan for my poetry class hovering pointlessly on my laptop screen. I called my head of school and told her, as if reading from a surrealist movie script, that I would not be returning tomorrow – or, quite possibly, ever again.

I lay down and stayed down for days that turned into weeks and then months, rising only to use the bathroom, or to occasionally bathe,

or to walk stiffly to the kitchen to eat the lunch my husband had prepared me. Someone dropped off a DVD box set of *Lost*, and I watched all ten discs in a way that had no start or finish. I stared at my computer and scrutinized baby seats, comparing the ones that bounced to the ones that swung to the ones that bounced and swung. When I could concentrate, I read, lying on my side until my shoulder ached, and then turning onto my other side until that shoulder ached. Outside my bedroom window, the golden leaves turned brown and then disappeared, leaving behind stiff bare branches that didn't change at all until the snow came, and then they were like pale bony arms. Dark came earlier. Mornings, I'd move from the bed to the couch, and evenings, from the couch to the bed, my mind dulled past the point of yearning.

I wish I read then, as I have now, Rachel Cusk's 2001 memoir *A Life's Work*. Cusk's account of pregnancy and early motherhood is nothing like the breezy chapters of the books then piled on my nightstand – books like *What to Expect When You're Expecting* and *What to Expect The First Year*. In late pregnancy, the birth of her first child approaching, Cusk feels herself drowning in the pablum of scripted motherhood: hospital pamphlets with their sunny cartoon mamas-to-be, decorating nurseries and rejecting unpasteurized cheese; pregnancy books with their recipes for non-alcoholic cocktails. "I long to receive some signal of subterfuge, some coded reference to resistance," she writes. "My sex has become an exiguous, long-laid, lovingly furnished trap into which I have inadvertently wandered and from which now there is no escape."

I imagine Cusk would be unsurprised to learn, as I did from scouring the internet during my captivity, that there's no medical evidence that bed rest does anything to prevent pre-term labor. (Five years later, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists would release a statement advising doctors to stop recommending it.) Bed rest was – and still often is – prescribed because, quite simply, in the face of possible fetal demise, doctors need *something* to prescribe. That this something is a full-blown assault on a woman's complexity and wholeness – her absolute reduction to a biological function – is telling. Such a prescription could only exist in a world where complex and whole women are generally not the goal, and where smaller-scale attacks on mothers' humanity are commonplace. "Motherhood is a career in conformity from which no amount of subterfuge can liberate the soul without violence; and pregnancy is its boot camp," Cusk declares in her memoir's opening chapter. Even after bed rest had been revealed to me as little more than superstition, I surren-

dered myself to the beige cushions of my living room couch. What else could I do? This was not a time to probe or to challenge, for I had a baby to protect.

When, at 32 weeks' gestation, this baby was still ensconced in my womb, my doctor released me back into the world. I carried my daughter to term, and then beyond term, at which point I was told I might need to be induced. "Huh!" my doctor said at my forty-week appointment, as if holding up a button that had slipped behind a couch cushion. "This must just be your cervix's physiology!" I didn't think to say anything back that would have hinted at the enormity of this error that had plundered my livelihood and identity. For at this point, my boot camp was nearing its end, and I was a novitiate, primed to enter into my self-sacrificing – and wholly sacred – calling.

If pregnancy sets in motion women's reorientation from the cerebral to the biological, early motherhood has a way of cementing it. Having read about the difficulty new mothers can have breastfeeding, I was filled with pride when my own milk exuberantly announced itself hours after I'd given birth. I looked down at my newborn daughter, who latched right on, and felt intense relief. This wasn't the relief of knowing my baby was being nourished, but rather, the full-body elation one might have when winning a distinctive award, or being honored at an elite ceremony. "You're a milk goddess!" one of the post-partum nurses exclaimed when she came to check on my progress. For the first time ever, I felt a surge of pride in my body's own involuntary functioning, as if the workings of my mammary glands were somehow earned, somehow proof of my virtue and worth.

Producing breast milk, of course, has nothing to do with virtue, just as being able to conceive, or carry a fetus to term – or breathe or sweat, for that matter – have nothing to do with virtue. And yet, as a new emigre into this mother identity, what an accomplishment it felt like to slip right into character! I carried my daughter in one of those slings that made us look like we'd sprung from the earth; I signed us up for a Mommy and Me class and broadened my repertoire of children's songs; I took photos of my daughter and dangled them on Facebook for people to coo over. Who knew what pathways my mind forged in those early months as a mother, what inner dialogues, what silently negotiated compromises, what dark turns and difficult revelations? I hardly acknowledged these myself – and why should I? Following the script of "good" motherhood, I felt the world's recognition wash over me, and I experienced it as personal triumph.

In a culture that denies mothers' thinking and rewards their compliance, is it any wonder that mothers might fail to claim the full

breadth and potential of their maternal practice? Sara Ruddick explains how “out of maternal powerlessness, in response to a society whose values it does not determine,” many mothers fall back on ways of being that are not wholly authentic, not wholly their own. “Inauthenticity,” she explains, “gives rise to the values of obedience and being ‘good’” so that “to fulfill the values of the dominant culture is taken as an achievement.” She notes that “a ‘good’ mother may well be praised in colluding in her own subordination, with destructive consequences to herself and her children.”

Yes! What a pleasure it was, in my early months of motherhood, to hear my mother-in-law fawn over my devotion to my colicky baby daughter, my patience, my tenderness, my sainthood. What a joy it was to hear my own mother tell me that I was “a natural,” as if mothering were a knack one either has or doesn’t. These were well-meaning, loving compliments, and the happiness and fervor they affirmed weren’t entirely imagined. Motherhood, for me, *has* been filled with moments of intense fulfillment and exquisite joy, but like stars in a vast night sky, it’s the surrounding space that gives these their shape and sparkle.

What happens in this space is maternal thought – sometimes bright, sometimes troublingly dark, sometimes gray and hazy – but always more layered and nuanced than anything a mother is regaled for around a Mother’s Day brunch table.

So how can a woman resist the sweet siren-call of the mother ideal? How can she carve out a motherhood that’s not a projection of others’ fantasies, but an authentic expression of her values?

It’s unfortunate but true that while the museums and cathedrals and theaters of this world teem with hallowed mothers, they provide few models of thinker-mothers. I would argue that Cusk, enacting on paper the movements of her maternal mind, stands as one example, offering a blueprint for others. The first step, her memoir suggests, is to examine with clear eyes the far-reaching ways our culture pushes mothers toward conformity. If in becoming a mother, a woman risks “becoming a brainwashed being programmed not to bear witness to the truth,” then it seems vital that we learn to recognize the mechanisms of this programming, so that we may counter them. The next step would be to bring to light the “truth” of motherhood, as Cusk does, by making visible the puzzles and trials and devastations concealed behind its blisses and triumphs. These will vary from woman to woman, from culture to culture, from life circumstance to life circumstance, for the challenges of a white, middle class stay-at-home mother can’t possibly be the same as those of a mother who works

two jobs, or a black mother, or a divorced mother, or a teenage mother, or a lesbian mother, or any overlapping combination of these identities. The point is that dismantling mythical motherhood will require regular public doses of the real, whatever its form.

Cusk's imagery is also instructive. To accompany her through early motherhood is to be confronted over and over with description of bisection and division, of things torn asunder. At one point, Cusk describes becoming a mother as the feeling "of stepping off the proper path of my life, of traveling forwards but at some unbreachable distance; as if I had boarded a train and could see through the window the road on which I had always been." At another, she describes feeling as if she has been *split in two*: "The person and the mother pay each other no heed. . . . They tumble forwards, each with its separate life, driven by the same source but seeking no longer to correspond."

These images bring me back again to that 22-year-old I once was, who sat at her desk conceiving of womanhood and motherhood as two distinct, sequential states of being, united solely by the fact of her femaleness. I had no idea then that the qualities I'd one day bring to motherhood – contemplativeness, ambition, a mild cynicism – were the exact ones that had always been part of me. I wonder if Cusk would have felt so completely divided from herself had she not been primed to dissociate her writing self from her nurturing self. By the end of her memoir, her daughter has turned one, and the tone of her writing has lightened. The closing pages contain moments of appreciation for the small joys of parenting a toddler who tickles her feet and leaves "half-eaten biscuits" in her shoes. "Increasingly, motherhood comes to seem to me not a condition but a job," Cusk writes. We have the sense that she has arrived at a place, however tenuous, where mothering and thought can co-exist – where, in fact, the mothering *is* the thought, for it's also at this moment that her art, this memoir, has been completed, shaped from the raw material of raising a child.

If I've flourished at all as a mom in the past ten years, it's because I've similarly come to understand motherhood not as a state of being, but a practice to which I can apply myself. In the hours and days following the birth of my first baby, I swiftly learned that motherhood was not a dormant state that lay in wait in me. Were I to have relied on "maternal instinct" alone to keep my tiny daughter's brain and body nourished, her heart pumping, her body warm, and her nervous system settled, I would have failed. And as my children have turned from babies to preschoolers to elementary schoolers to – in the case of my oldest – a preteen, instinct has only become a less reliable guide. Each day, my kids' needs become more complicated, their struggles

more unpredictable – and all the while, I, too, am shifting, recalibrating, gaining new wisdom and letting go of old beliefs. In my mothering, I am anything but a marble Madonna. I am a determined shape-shifter, transforming and readjusting as I grapple my way through a role I must invent as I go.

I love my children with a fierceness that language cannot contain. But being a mother requires more than love. And while it may be my heart that fuels and energizes my maternal work, the work itself, I've come to understand, is fundamentally an undertaking of the mind. For we are thinkers before we are mothers, and it is from our thinking that our mothering is born.

To identify this mind-work, it has helped me to consider how my mothering has evolved. These changes are barely detectable in the day-to-day but have announced themselves spectacularly in retrospect. Thinking back on my moves as a newer mother, I cringe at my rookie errors, and it's all I can do to keep from falling on my knees to beg forgiveness of my older daughter, the primary victim of my inexperience. Today, when my four-year-old heads to preschool with shorts over her pants and a unicorn headdress, I remember with a stab of pain how I'd make her older sister "look presentable." When I open a box of frozen chicken nuggets instead of cooking, I no longer feel like a domestic failure but appreciate the gift of an hour of relaxed togetherness. Once upon a time, I hid from my children my sadnesses and regrets, my frustrations and confusions, equating good mothering with polished perfection. Now, I remind myself that it's okay to show them my cracks – that these, in fact, help teach them what it means to be human.

I believe in a world where a mismatched outfit doesn't make you plummet in others' esteem, in which time together is more important than a righteously wrangled home-cooked meal, in which vulnerability isn't a liability, but a strength. In my most authentic moments as a mother, I understand fully what Ruddick means when she writes that "the work of mothering can become a rewarding, disciplined expression of conscience."

Every day I make mistakes – mistakes I'll no doubt cringe over in years to come. But I keep learning, and I keep experimenting, refining and expanding my practice, knowing that to conceive of mothering as a discipline is to recognize its immense importance, and to imbue it with the dignity it deserves. "We need to imagine a world," concludes Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born*, "in which every woman is the presiding genius of her own body. In such a world women will truly create new life, bringing forth not only children . . . but

the visions, and the thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence – a new relationship to the universe.”

This morning, while I was slicing fruit for breakfast, I was thinking. When I helped my daughter shade in the scales of a sea-serpent, I was thinking. When I praised my son’s kindness, I was thinking.

At drop-off, at pickup, in the grocery line, the mothers are thinking. They are thinking in hospital waiting rooms, on the phone with doctors, in line at the food bank, on the way to the barber. In happiness they are thinking, and in anger, and boredom. At home, at work, in the rumble of subway tunnels they are thinking, and at bedtime, at naptime, at the press of a hand to their side in the middle of the night they are thinking again.

I would like to believe my children will see a day when motherhood, like Niobe restored to flesh, is returned in its wholeness to the world. It will take all of us to haul maternal thinking into the open, where it can grow and flourish, transforming from private endeavor to collective force.

In the produce aisle, a mother will show her child how to feel for ripeness, and we will see her thinking. On the street corner, a mother will wait while her child toes a crack in the sidewalk, and we will acknowledge her thinking. Pediatricians will praise the acuity of mothers’ thinking. Mothers will be hired, promoted – elected to office – for the maternal agility of their thinking.

Yesterday, I wrote a note to my mother, thanking her for the steady intelligence of her mothering. Today, I will call my best friend, and I will map for her the genius of her mothering.

Tomorrow, maybe it will be you. Which thinker will you recognize for her mothering? Which mother will you recognize for her thinking?

Stop her. Tell her. Crack her heart open. Across the world the chain will grow, like so many synapses firing.