

Mother Culture

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It is written somewhere, "A mother is only a woman, but she needs the love of Jacob, the patience of Job, the wisdom of Moses, the foresight of Joseph, and the firmness of Daniel." But a mother has not only to have all these things; she must have them all at once, often when she is quite young, and too often when she has had no previous training of any kind of the marvelously varied duties she has to perform. All at once (to take an extreme case), a young girl who has all her life been sheltered and shielded, not only from every trouble, but from every experience of life, is made responsible for the home happiness of her husband, and (as if that were not enough) for the health and happiness of a smaller or greater number of grown-up human beings whose help she hires for money, who have to be directed, controlled, encouraged, or reproved, and conducted safely along through the infinite dangers of domestic service. Before she marries, she pictures to herself little of the extreme difficulties of managing that most complicated of machines, a household--not for one week only, during her mother's absence, but for year after year, without stop or stay, for the rest of her time.

If these two things are difficult, how very much the case is complicated when a wholly untried responsibility comes upon her, and not only her own health, but that of another depends on how she manages her life. And then, perhaps, just as she is grasping the situation, and one child fills her whole heart, more room is wanted, and more and more, and the servant questions goes on, the management of expenditure goes on, the desire to be more than ever her husband's companion grows stronger and stronger, and the centre of it all is one little woman--wife, mother, mistress all in one! Then it is that she gets overdone. Then it is that she wears herself out. Then it is that, in her efforts to be ideal wife, mother, and mistress, she forgets that she is herself. Then it is, in fact, that she stops growing.

There is no sadder sight in life than a mother, who has so used herself up in her children's childhood, that she has nothing to give them in their youth. When babyhood is over and school begins, how often children take to proving that their mother is wrong. Do you as often see a child proving to its father that he is wrong? I think not. For the father is growing far more often than the mother. He is gaining experience year by year, but she is standing still. Then, when her children come to that most difficult time between childhood and full development she is nonplussed; and, though she may do much for her children, she cannot do all she might, if she, as they, were growing!

Is there not some need for "mother culture"? But how is the state of things to be altered? So many mothers say, "I simply have no time for myself!" "I never read a book!" Or else, "I don't think it is right to think of myself!" They not only starve their minds, but they do it deliberately, and with a sense of self-sacrifice which seems to supply ample justification. There are, moreover, unfortunately, only too many people who think that sort of thing so lovely that public opinion appears to justify it. But does public opinion justify anything? Does it justify tight-lacing--or high heels--or bearing-reins for horses? It can never justify anything which leads to the "Oh, it's only mother" tone in any young person.

That tone is not the right one. But can it be altered? Each mother must settle this for herself. She must weigh things in the balance. She must see which is the most important--the time spent in luxuriously gloating over the charms of her fascinating baby, or what she may do with that time to keep herself "growing" for the sake of that baby "some day," when it will want her even more than it does now.

The only way to do it is to be so strongly impressed with the necessity for growing herself that she herself makes it a real object in life. She can only rarely be helped from the outside. The resolute planting of Miss Three-years-old in her chair at one end of the table with her toys, of Master Five-years-old at the other with his occupations, and fascinating Master Baby on the rug on the floor with his ring and his ball--the decided announcement, "Now mother is going to be busy"--will do those young people a world of good! Though some of their charms will be missed, they will gain respect from mother's time, and some self-reliance into the bargain, while mother's tired back gets a rest, if only for a short time, either on the sofa or flat upon the floor. Then she can listen to her children, and perhaps do a little thinking--not about frocks and foods, but about characters, and how to deal with them; or she can take a book, and "grow" that way. This would do something, but not enough. Mother must have time to herself. And we must not say "I cannot." Can any of us say till we have tried, not for one week, but for one whole year, day after day, that we "cannot" get one half-hour out of the twenty-four for "Mother Culture?"--one half-hour in which we can read, think, or "remember."

The habit of reading is so easily lost; not so much, perhaps, the power of enjoying books as the actual power of reading at all. It is incredible how, after not being able to use the eyes for a time, the habit of reading fast has to be painfully regained. The power to read fast is much to be desired, and the people who read every word are left sadly behind by the people who read from full stop to full stop at a glance. This power is what our children are gaining at school, and this power is what we are losing when we refuse to give a little time out of our lives to "Mother Culture." It is worth anything to get and to keep even that; and to do it, it is not a bit necessary to read "stiff" books.

The wisest woman I ever knew--the best wife, the best mother, the best mistress, the best friend--told me once, when I asked her how, with her weak health and many calls upon her time, she managed to read so much, "I always keep three books going--a stiff book, a moderately easy book, and a novel, and I always take up the one I feel fit for!" That is the secret; always have something "going" to grow by. If we mothers were all "growing" there would be less going astray among our boys, less separation in mind from our girls.

It would seem as if we mothers often simply made for ourselves the difficulties we find in after life by shutting our minds up in the present. What we need is a habit of taking our minds out of what one is tempted to call "the domestic rag-bag" of perplexities, and giving it a good airing in something which keeps it "growing." A brisk walk will help. But, if we would do our best for our children, grow we must; and on our power of growth surely depends, not only our future happiness, but our future usefulness.

Is there, then, not need for more "Mother Culture"?