

Birth of Understanding

I was once told that I couldn't understand because I didn't have children.

A friend at work had been granted yet another personal day because her child was sick, and I felt it was unfair. I was offended by what she said, and somewhat resentful at being excluded from a club to which, at the time, I didn't even want to belong.

I thought about this the other night as I was putting my children to sleep, trying to hide the tears streaming down my face at the thought of losing them.

I know now that my friend was not inflicting judgment on me. She was merely stating a truth. People who don't have kids can't understand what it's like to feel what parents feel. Now that I do understand, I'm still not sure sometimes that I want to belong to the club. Loving someone this much is frightening.

And in retrospect, it's something I've never truly done before.

It's not that I haven't always envisioned how it should be - pure, unconditional, eternal - because I have, and I've certainly had love in my life. Reality, though, is not always so kind. Relationships don't work out, people die . . . after enough time, enough disappointment, you learn, perhaps even unknowingly, to just give a part of yourself instead of the whole.

That way, when the ending inevitably comes, you've got something left.

Then you make these little people and bring them into the world, and maybe for a few weeks you can keep your distance because after all, you're just getting to know each other. But slowly, slowly you start giving away pieces of your heart that you had forgotten existed, until one day you realize you couldn't survive if something happened to them. And you understand.

And it's not even just the thought of losing them. It's watching them change before your very eyes, knowing the acknowledgment of how fast they're growing won't slow down the time. Knowing that pictures from just yesterday can make you weep and long to go back. Knowing the little sleepers they've outgrown will forever represent an idyllic period of life to which you can never return.

It's calling the doctor in the middle of the night because he has a fever, terrified of what you did wrong; the guilt of feeling to blame every time she gets a sniffle or an earache or cries when you don't know why. It's the sleepless nights holding him so tight because comforting him, sometimes, is all you can do. It's checking on her every five minutes to make sure she's breathing in her crib.

It's the need to protect them at all costs, and knowing that you simply can't; the overwhelming sadness that someday very soon they're going to walk out the door and you won't be there to save them from the cruelty of life and pain from which you couldn't even protect yourself.

It's trying to memorize every pout, each gentle sigh, how she holds her tiny hands in front of her face in such complete awe, the bashful way he looked at you and smiled and burrowed into your shoulder to sleep, knowing with a kind of bittersweet ache that these moments are as fleeting as snowflakes on their little cheeks.

It's knowing that for the first time in your life you simply don't care about you, that nothing is more important than their health and happiness. Knowing that you would give your own life, never to see or hold them again, if it could guarantee their own. It's knowing, finally, the meaning of true love, and fearing that it will be taken from you.

I once said that having my children was the hardest thing I would ever do, but I now understand that I was wrong. Loving them is.