

Put On Your Playground Face

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I met Anita shortly after Katie was born. Our midwife practice invited groups of new mothers who lived geographically close together to meet and consider forming a new mom's group. Two really great things came out of this – I had an outlet to stave off social isolation, but more importantly, I met Anita.

Anita's son Louis was about 4 months older than Kate and the 4 of us started hanging out together. Anita and I have similar philosophies on life and on parenting – given, you know, the extensive experience we had!

One day we were talking about how lonely it can be as a new mother with no true idea about what we were doing or whether we were doing it right – after all, these enchanting creatures do not come with a manual – and quite frankly, few of us are prepared for the transition – nay, the jarring and instantaneous headlong crash into motherhood that we were experiencing. On this day, Anita revealed to me a startling concept I had not previously considered. She called it “the Playground Face”. Allow me to explain.

New Mom who, while adoring her new bundle of joy, is going squirrely from sitting in the house adapting to her new role as human feedbag, or walking around and around and around the block, or rocking the crying baby. Perhaps she is exhausted from night wakings and night feedings. Perhaps she is overwrought with guilt over the constant and gnawing anger she feels towards her partner. Or perhaps she is just despondent from having to endure a third – possibly fourth – day without a shower. New Mom finally gets it together and heads out to the park on a gloriously sunny day with her bundle of joy. Off to the playground, the sun burning a smile on her face, where she feels assured she will run into other mothers. And she does.

After some hellos and some chit chat, New Mom starts to notice something. These women are pretty calm. They look pretty happy. They seem to have it together, to be so organized, as if they grasped this whole motherhood thing with such ease... And I'm such a disaster, she starts to think. I have no idea what I'm doing. I feel like I'm falling apart. They must think I'm SUCH a bad mother!

What New Mom doesn't realize is that all the while, many of the new moms at the park are having a similar internal dialogue, reaching similar self-deprecating conclusions. Each has slapped on a smile that is a combination of the relief experienced simply by getting out of the house and meeting other adults, and the mask that emerges to make sure no one is on to them. This latter element is the Playground Face.

The Playground Face is more common than you can imagine, and it can be found in habitats outside the playground as well: Parties, family dinners, grocery stores and shopping malls, doctors' offices, and for mothers who return to work, at the office.

Everything is great! She's just a joy. Wow, I just love being a mother! Oh, these bags under my eyes? I'm just not getting as much sleep as I'd like. Yes, he's fine too. He's pretty helpful. When he's home. It's hard for him to balance work and home life. What? Oh, that's just some spit-up I missed. I haven't had a chance to do laundry; now that she's sitting up and wants to interact it's hard to get anything done. She's really hungry a lot right now, I'm getting so much reading done

because it feels like I just sit on the couch breastfeeding all day. I'm sorry, do you have a Kleenex?

We try so hard to keep it together. Transitioning to motherhood is complex and it's different for each woman. Yet, in many ways, it's the same. Upon returning from an exhausting day at work (where they talk to adults), our partners are sometimes perplexed that the house looks the same (messy) and we are dressed in the same outfit (pajamas) as we were when they left in the morning. We feel guilty that we have "done nothing" all day, and enraged that the truly important work we have been doing – caring for and nurturing our child – has been totally dismissed.

For many women who enjoy working and derive a great deal of personal satisfaction from their jobs, time off on maternity leave can be excruciating as they go from 60 to 0 in nothing flat. They feel an enormous loss of purpose and identity. This will not take away from their love and devotion to their child, it simply creates a set of stressors that can catch them off guard.

Consider the woman who is very organized and used to having her life structured and planned. Imagine the havoc created by the sudden appearance of this demanding creature who has clearly not grasped the concept of a schedule, who insists on everything being on their terms!

And at the opposite end of the spectrum, the free spirit who lives life on a whim and is accustomed to social outings and entertaining: While not always the case, the new arrival can be real style-cramper! The sudden shift to slavery to frequent needs of one completely dependant on her may lead the free spirit to feel trapped and resentful.

But off we go to the playground, smiles plastered on our faces. We will readily discuss such intimate details as breastfeeding, what is happening to our bodies and with our partners. Yet so often there seems to be an invisible boundary, a line not often crossed – the fence containing the impact of how all the changes we experience are affecting us and how we are feeling about it.

Women adapt to motherhood differently. Some embrace it and are invested in their mothering – it gives them a sense of purpose and passion that they may not have had previously. Some are very practical in their approach to motherhood. Some are challenged by it and experience more difficulty in assuming a maternal role. And some women are seriously overwhelmed by post-partum depression.

Many of you will remember when, in August of 2000, Dr. Suzanne Killinger-Johnson threw herself and her 6 month old son in front of a TTC subway train. She appeared to have the perfect life – a happy marriage, a growing family, a successful medical and psychotherapy practice. By all accounts, she was doing well. But Dr. Killinger-Johnson suffered from post-paratum depression, and her story is a startling and tragic warning that it is imperative we look out for, and after one another; that we check in when we notice the strained look, the forced smile, the catch in the voice.

The irony that Dr. Killinger-Johnson was a practicing mental health professional should not be lost on anyone. Her death shook the mental health community to the core. She was surrounded by health care providers. She was one of their own. How could they not have seen it? Was she that successful in concealing her despair? How does this happen?

Decades, perhaps centuries ago it's possible that new mothers did not face the levels of isolation that many experience today. Frank Brenner, on the World Socialist Web Site writes:

“For most of its existence the human race has raised children collectively. Mothers gave birth surrounded by their own mothers and other relatives, and child-rearing was the responsibility of the entire extended family. No doubt it was still possible in this context for a new mother to feel let down or depressed, but that feeling would have been greatly mitigated because a mother would never have had to worry about coping on her own with a new baby. In effect, her “empty” feeling after delivering her child would be filled by the close ties of her family and friends. Capitalism destroyed most of those ties and reduced the family to the minimum unit necessary for functioning in a market economy—the nuclear family. But that family structure imposes a terrible—really an inhuman—burden on the mother, a burden that many women simply cannot bear.”

As I look back on those early years, I realize that it’s not just mothers who wear the Playground Face. Upon returning from a post-natal reunion with our pre-natal class, my husband plaintively exclaimed, “Everyone there looks happier than we are!” I wasn’t able to poll that group, however I have conducted a rather extensive, though informal survey since then, and it turns out that many couples experience some, shall we say, discontent in the wake of an addition to the family. Sleep is scarce, nerves are frayed, boundaries are crossed, feelings are hurt – and there might be some mood swings. Mom is trying to hard to keep it all together with their peers and the outside world in general, but all that frustration, anxiety, fear and sometimes anger has to come out somewhere – and all too often, it gets dumped all over Dad. So when Mom and Dad go out with other moms and dads, everyone decked out with their best Playground Faces, it feels as if they are the only ones with marital woes.

Looking farther back, it occurred to me that the Playground Face is not just a parental phenomenon. When I first met my friend Mary, she was the president for a professional association to which we both belonged. She’s an attractive, petite and serene looking woman who gives off a sense of calm and quiet confidence. Watching her give the annual report at the conference, I envied her composure and professionalism, thinking about how flaky I must come across to so many people.

A couple of years later, as I got to know her better, I shared those observations and reflections with her. To my great surprise, she laughed in astonishment and confessed that she had been a wreck that day, and each day leading up to her presentation. Her stomach was churning with anxiety. She shared that not only did she not feel confident in her role, but she had envied my energy and liveliness, my apparent comfort with others, and my ability to just starting singing and jamming with those who had brought guitars. It was a very illuminating conversation for both of us!

Our first principle entreats us to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and many of us work hard to uphold that principal with regard to those around us. Yet somehow we loose sight of ourselves – we need to affirm our own inherent worth and dignity, starting by acknowledging that we’re not perfect and neither is anyone else! When we can acknowledge that our own feelings and experiences are valid, then perhaps we can give ourselves permission to share those feelings and experiences.

It is in sharing our feelings and experiences that we start to heal and to grow. We not only heal ourselves as we shed the burden of isolation and sense of shame that there has been something wrong with us, we give others permission to heal, and to release their burden and their shame.

A gentleman named John Dick spoke to my home congregation last year about his struggles with depression and addiction, his self-loathing and the self-destructive life in which he was living – or perhaps dying. Through hard work and commitment – and eventually through sharing, he

overcame his difficulties to lead a productive life. His is a story of hope, and he now shares that story with high school students, and anyone who will listen because he understands: Telling his story gives others permission to tell theirs.

Some of you may be familiar with Globe and Mail journalists Ian Brown and Joanna Schneller. Their son Walker suffers from an incredibly rare and debilitating disease that affects nearly every aspect of his being to some degree. Occasionally Ian writes about his “beautiful, broken boy.” While touching to the average reader, it must be especially poignant for other parents of children with incredibly rare and debilitating diseases. The isolation is two-fold – rarely is there contact with others who are affected by the disease, and the conflicting feelings of love, devotion, guilt, frustration, anger and shame must be overwhelming. I can only imagine that it might be somewhat of a relief to know that there others walking in their shoes.

Ian Brown recently visited several families across North America with children who share the same disease as Walker. The resulting story was an affirmation of the power sharing – the journey and the encounters have not cured Walker’s disease; Ian and Joanne will likely continue to experience rollercoaster of emotion and the strain in their family life; but one thing is very different. They now know they are not alone. They are certain of it. Perhaps they may even be able to let go of the guilt and shame that come with the feelings that can’t help but accompany what life has heaped on their shoulders.

I have a beautiful, blonde-haired, 14 year old stepdaughter named Olivia. She has autism. Until very recently, Olivia has never had the opportunity to spend any appreciable time around other children with autism – children like her. She is very loving and fun, and she likes people – and food! She doesn’t really express how she feels about anything so it’s hard to know what her experiences are. But on some level, she must have an awareness that she is somehow different from most people. I have always despaired that this must, on some level, be an isolating aspect of her existence.

I recently took Olivia to her third meeting of a group for children with autism. The participants have been carefully selected to be somewhat similar in age and expressions of autistic behaviour. It is the first time Olivia has had spent appreciable time with others like herself. We hope it is helpful for her, that she finds a sense of kinship, a sense of connection and familiarity. It’s difficult to know – one of the hallmarks of autism is that it negatively impacts an individual’s ability to communicate what they are experiencing. But we remain hopeful.

As the group born of the midwife clinic started to dwindle, my friend Anita joined another group called Momnet. This is an organization with a clear mandate to connect moms and create opportunities for dialogue. Every week there is a guest speaker or specific topic – sometimes they are informational or fun, however with intentional regularity there are speakers and topics dealing with the tough stuff, including post-partum depression. Anita would often talk about the deep sharing that occurred and how each member of the group was not only able to come clean with their “dirty little secrets” but was able to feel that they were not alone – others truly understood how they felt.

There are many opportunities for mothers to connect and discover that others are experiencing similar difficulties. I have to admit I’ve not really appreciated the recent trend in personal blogs. I have not understood why people feel they need to take what is essentially their private journal and make it accessible for the world to read. I further have not understood the desire to read the blogs of strangers. However, in researching material for this sermon, I happened on some mommy blogs, and started to see the light. Here was a way for moms, who are often house-bound but with computer at the ready, to get things off their chest and confess their fears,

anxieties and anger. Better yet, countless other moms could read these posts and instantly know that they are not the only ones who sometimes want to run out the door screaming and never return. They wouldn't, but they worry that because they feel like it, they're doing something wrong. They're "bad." And here, written for all to see, is someone else who feels *exactly the same way!*

Fortunately for those of us whose affinity for technological sharing is limited, blogs are not the only source of this third-party affirmation. There are countless books, magazine articles and radio and TV features bringing the secret anxieties of motherhood to life. Just last year a friend from my congregation participated in the creation and performance of the Mom Project, a theatre production about the trials and tribulations of motherhood. When I shared with her summary of my proposed talk, she instantly knew what I was talking about!

Let's revisit New Mom, in her doctor's office, deeply engrossed in an article that's caught her eye. She says to herself, "Wow, I'm not the only one. Maybe some of my friends actually feel some of these things too." New mom is encouraged to tentatively mention to one of her friends this article she's read about how isolating it can be in the first few months after a child is born, and geez, sometimes it really is! This gives another woman permission to begin to open up and share some of the struggles they've been having. And hopefully the dialogue continues.

Be gentle with yourselves, whatever adversity life brings you. Remember and affirm your own inherent worth and dignity, and know that your story is important to share, for your own healing, and for the healing of others.

May your grief, your sorrow, your anger, your fear, your anxiety or your shame rest gently on your heart. And may you know that you are not alone.

Blessed be.