

The Interrupted Life

By Rose Jonas, Ph.D.

When you get out of school and go to work, someone tells you your responsibilities, maybe trains you a little, and then leaves you on your own, if you're lucky. Even if you're not lucky and have someone always over your shoulder, or chaotic and constantly changing work, the job takes on a routine. You know when to come and go home, and what will fill the hours between. You grow comfortable knowing you're bringing order to chaos, or rearranging the chaos. You set goals. You meet them. You may even get rewarded.

All of that changes when you begin having babies. Your first inkling that you are no longer in control happens a week or two after you come home from the hospital. The clock says it's noon, you're still in your jammies and you have no idea why. Nor can you point to anything you've achieved since that pre-dawn wail jolted you over to the crib. It's another day in a ceaseless whirl of unselfish service.

The next comes one night soon after when you fall into bed, more exhausted than you've ever been, positive that you cannot move. Then comes that wail again and you drag from your innards a gasp of energy you didn't know existed so you can crawl to the crib for the zillionth time today.

There, the little face (where you've adoringly watched your family's generations dance as your baby decides who she will look like), this little person has just introduced you to your life's new and harsh realities: the depths of your heretofore unknown selfishness, and the interrupted life.

You had seen yourself as a generous woman to this point, but it is hard hard hard to respond to all these demands. Nonetheless, taking care of a baby chisels off the corners of your selfishness and you accept that your life just is what this child (and the next and the next) needs. No matter how important your job is, or what the books say about taking care of yourself, or how much your husband helps, you and your friends will look at each other with the same awareness - whether grim, joyful, or just resigned - being a mom is your first and biggest priority.

You adjust yourself to that. Within weeks you're running out of the house in a driving rain, juggling a diaper bag, car seat and umbrella stroller, neither breathing hard nor feeling put upon. It's just what you do.

It's the interrupted life that always surprises. It underlines the realization that your life is no longer under your control. It's what sends you scurrying off to work some mornings, grateful for its order or familiar chaos. You can deal with that. What always aggravates is the rush, the impossibility of completing a task. Just start to talk on the phone, empty the dryer, make a bed, read a recipe, order a pizza, and the little person who luckily resembles you simply **NEEDS YOU RIGHT NOW**.

You never adjust to that. You find ways to manage. Casey, who works for a grocery chain, gets up at 5:00 so she can drink coffee and stare at the wall till consciousness seeps in and she can face her family. Bobby, who washes people's hair, sings gospel songs and irons in the late hours, full of dreams for her smart son.

The goal-setting books (written mostly by men and mostly - I think - for men) tell you to make a list of your priorities and do the most important things first, and work your way down to the least. Hah! You make lists, all right. Some of us even make lists of lists! You also learn to multi-task: Call school while you empty the dishwasher and write an excuse note. But the timing of your tasks is usually determined by that permanent and unchanging priority: the family.

You never get used to it, really. You just wish - and you're careful how you say this so God shouldn't make anything bad happen - but you just wish you had a few minutes to yourself once in awhile.

If you're lucky, you ultimately realize you are on a river. It has strong currents or shallow rapids, and occasional quiet pools. You float, you steer, you keep an eye out for storms and drifting logs. But the river remains in charge of the task, the destination.

If you're smart, you stop asking what happened to your old life. You learn ways to become happy living on water, and skilled at managing waves. But there are days when living the interrupted. . .MOM!

This is your life and your career for most of us is built behind, not in front of, our family life. Remember what your priorities are, and you'll bob better on the river.