

An open letter to new mothers

Dear mother,

As you embark upon your first year of motherhood, I want to share with you some thoughts based on my own journey through those first 12 months, so recently completed.

It is incredible to me, after the agonizing slowness of those first days at home, that the rest of the time has gone by so quickly. Alex's habits, preferences and routines are now an integral part of our household. Yet I do remember what life was like before he came and what it was like to be brand new to this state of life called motherhood.

For me, the first few weeks at home were a huge adjustment. So I want to offer a word of encouragement. Allow yourself to ride the waves of shifting hormones until the storm abates and the seas grow calm. There is nothing wrong with you. As maddening as it is, it will pass. One moment you may be weeping uncontrollably, a blubbing ball of panic, and the next you may be overwhelmed by awe and a rush of joy so intense that you aren't sure your heart can contain it. The panic will fade. The joy will not.

Treasure the nighttime. When the refrigerator shuts down for the night, the air conditioner goes off, and the whole world is asleep, it is magic time

LOOKING BACK
on a year of
MOTHERHOOD

Photos by Chrisitan Basi

By Kathleen M. Basi

for mother and baby. Half asleep with a little morsel of humanity snuggled against you, for whom you are the entire world – you will never be so aware of the presence of God as you are in those moments.

Spend as much time as you possibly can staring into his eyes. It may be the first time in your life that you truly understand that the human eye is a mirror, and that you can see yourself reflected in it. Dissolve yourself in his starry eyes. Drink in his presence as if you are lost in the desert and he is an oasis – because he is. He is the part of you that you never knew was missing. And even though you think you know something about him based on those nine months he spent nestled beneath your ribs, dancing to the beat of your heart, you are about to experience the vastness of human potential. He is a blank slate waiting to be turned into a masterpiece, a slate that has invisible ink etched into its surface, waiting only for the right stimulus to spring into view. You will never really know how much you wrote and how much was there before you ever knew he existed.

In the days to come, you will be assaulted by conflicting opinions on child rearing. People feel more strongly on these subjects than they do about politics! Listen to those who have gone before, but more importantly, listen to yourself. Mother's intuition is nothing more complicated than knowing your child and being open to divine guidance. There will be many moments when all your thinking and preparation will not have prepared you for what you are facing. Take a deep breath, close your eyes and relax into the loving embrace of God. The One who made you also made your child. He will lead you.

Yes, you will screw up sometimes. Sometimes you can shrug it off, and other times you curse yourself for not thinking. But more often you'll realize there is more than one way to deal with a problem. There is no

perfect parenting method. Every child is unique, and there are exceptions to every rule. Trust yourself to know your child.

Trust.

That word struck me again today as Alex tottered across the porch and



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launched himself over the stairs into my arms. It never occurred to him that I might not catch him. Even his cries are a sign of trust: He trusts that if he cries, Mommy will make it better. And nothing breaks that trust. I see it in his eyes every single day.

How can one so small loom so large in my mind? He is 25 pounds, 31 inches and has yet to exchange a single word with me. Yet he is every bit as large a presence as my husband, my parents, my friends and my siblings. I suppose it's not so surprising. From day one we focus on them obsessively, reading into every grimace and moan. But over time, we relax – perhaps too much.

When I was new and overwhelmed, I went to mothers of all ages and asked a lot of "How did you ...?" questions. More often than not, a puzzled expression would creep over their faces, and I would hear, Hmmm. You know, I don't remember. It was very frustrating. How could you possibly forget?

But I am beginning to understand how, even from one child to the next, everything has to be relearned. It begins with losing the transitions. I know I marked the day when "the

smile of the angels," as Grandma Luth calls it, became a "real" smile. But when did that first, tentative chuckle turn to a giggle and then a full-body belly laugh? When did his hair get so shaggy and curly and his legs so long? None of that happens overnight, yet I only noticed in hindsight.

It happened to me, too. When did I cease to panic about brain damage every time he bumped his head? When did the letdown reflex stop drenching me at random intervals during the day? These are questions I can't answer because at last I stopped living one day to the next; I settled back into the rhythm and structure of life, albeit one enriched by the presence of a little man.

Since he has entered my life, I have slowed down. I stop to smell the flowers more often now, and the descent of the maple helicopters this spring was an occasion to be marked. I still multitask, but I live a little more in the moment than I used to, because I don't want to miss a thing.

Of course, I don't have it all figured out. There are still many unanswered questions. Will his presence increase as he grows, or is a soul simply a soul? Will the instinct be as effective in dealing with toddler stubbornness and teenage insubordination as it is at puzzling out sleep issues? Will he always be as happy and easygoing as he is now? Will he grow up to value what I value?

I can't believe it's been a year already. In those first weeks, when every moment was a new and terrifying ordeal of uncertainty, people kept telling me that childhood passes quickly. "Don't blink," my sister said one day, and I burst into tears. I couldn't comprehend it. Yet time slipped by, day after day unfolding until my little miracle boy has celebrated his first birthday. At least once a day, I still look at him and feel a thrill of awe and wonder that he is actually here. If anything, it has increased with the knowledge that his sibling is on the way.

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Maybe the fact that he is still nursing is what tricks my mind into seeing him, even now, as the same fragile, silky-skinned newborn who was first laid in my arms. Then again, maybe it is an experience common to all mothers. There are many things, in pregnancy and beyond, that cannot be truly shared or communicated properly, even with husbands, even with other mothers. Those moments are God's gift to mothers, I think – moments of inexpressible sweetness, moments that allow me to say truthfully, even in the middle of the worst day ever: I wouldn't trade a moment of this. Not for anything.

Welcome to the club, Mother.

Love,

Kate ■

Kate Basi and her husband, Christian, a teaching couple in Columbia, Mo., are now the parents of three children.