

Mothering in Real Time

by Jane Hammons

"If Hillary can forgive Bill, why can't you forgive Dad?" my seven-year-old son wails one night as I put him to bed.

It is 1998 and his father and I are in the first year of a difficult divorce. My son's familiarity with the President and First Lady is the result of the constant reportage on Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. I do monitor my sons' TV-watching, but I'm also a news junkie. I listen to and watch a variety of news programs and subscribe to several newspapers and news magazines. The transcript of President Clinton's testimony has been published in the San Francisco Chronicle. Jokes about cigars and blue dresses abound on the playground. We have come to know Hillary and Bill and Monica as if they were characters in a sitcom. Except, I'm not laughing. Okay, sometimes I'm laughing. But when my son compares my capacity for forgiveness to Hillary Clinton's and I come up short, I resent her.

"We don't really know if Hillary has forgiven Bill," I explain. "Just because she is staying with him doesn't mean he is forgiven."

Despite Hillary Clinton's 1992 proclamation on 60 Minutes that she was "no Tammy Wynette standing by her man," in 1998, she is still standing by her man. The accurate part of that statement is that she is "no Tammy Wynette," who was married five times and perhaps understood something Hillary Clinton does not: standby is one way to fly. But it's pretty clear that Hillary is not going to fly—not first class, not standby. She's going to remain by Bill's side.

"Why would she stay with him if she isn't going to forgive him?" my nine-year-old son chimes in from his bed on the other side of the room. A conversation about how Hillary Clinton gains and maintains power, in part, from her marriage to Bill Clinton isn't one I

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particularly want to have with my young sons. There is very little about this conversation that I do want to have with them.

“People make all kinds of choices about how they want to live.” I try to explain. “I can forgive your father and still not want to be married to him.” Having stayed in my own dysfunctional marriage for far too long, I have vowed to be honest with my children, who have witnessed their father's decline into alcoholism, drug addiction and delusion. He is violent and unpredictable: flying into rages at the park, threatening my sons' classmates and their parents. He has stumbled into walls, knocking himself unconscious. We have found him in pools of his own blood and urine on more than one occasion. He is often prevented by restraining orders from seeing our sons. I would be lying if I told my children I had forgiven their father at this point. And they would know it.

We don't have much use for euphemism in our lives. When they ask questions, I do my best to respond in what I hope are age-appropriate but concrete ways. More often than not their inquiries lead to what I think of as cultural exchanges between the worlds of adult and child, women and men: thus issues of power are often at the core.

In 1970 I was a junior in high school when I declared myself a feminist. I understood little more than the basic concept that feminism was a movement concerned with the rights and equality of women, but that was enough for me. Historically speaking, this makes me a second wave feminist, though I'm not much interested in parsing the waves of feminism. As early as 1975, Robin Morgan celebrated feminism's diffuse strands in a Ms. Magazine article. When I use the word feminist to describe myself to my sons, I do not affix any adjective or prefix—radical, global, Marxist, Amazon, post-etc.—nor do I discuss historical waves unless it comes up in a specific context such as suffrage or Roe v. Wade, for example. My sons are too young to have been aware of riot grrls at the height of

their movement. But they did come of age in the era of government-sponsored Girl Power, launched in 1996 by the Department of Health and Human Services. It is most often represented—or misrepresented—by slogans on their female classmates' t-shirts: Girls Kick Ass; Boys are Stupid.

My sons are smart enough to know that real ideas are seldom represented by slogans on t-shirts; nonetheless some of these messages, like a lot of public discourse, must be mediated. I've found the best way to do that is to try to keep a discussion going when they raise an issue or when we observe an event together. A few years ago, I was teaching a unit on gender with my first-year composition students at UC Berkeley. I had assigned excerpts from two books popular at the time: *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (Pipher and Ross, 1995) and *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (Kindlon and Thompson, 2000). When he was ten, my youngest son saw the books on our dining room table. He was not yet familiar with the reference to Ophelia, but understood the significance of Cain. "Do people think boys are all bad like Cain? That we don't understand our emotions?" he demanded to know.

This was in the wake of Columbine shootings, and suddenly everyone was focused on the emotional well-being of boys. But my son had it exactly right. In large part, the point of entry to this concern was fear: that all boys, because of repressed anger and violent tendencies, were potential Harris and Klebold clones. I talk to him about the fact that the authors of these books were drawing on familiar cultural icons—Ophelia, a girl who drowns in her emotions; Cain, a boy whose weapon is anger—to draw attention to the positive guidance they offer in their books—that the words *reviving* and *raising* suggested ways of taking action against common self-destructive trends in both boys and girls.

Years later, while watching the breaking news of the Virginia Tech

Massacre, my older son checked the clock and wondered how long it would take to blame Seung-Hui Cho's rampage on a taste for violent video games. In the span of a few hours, reporters began to posit—with no basis whatsoever—that like Harris and Klebold, Cho was addicted to violent video games. Thus far, no evidence supporting that claim has been found. On the contrary, what his computer holds is evidence that violent and disturbed as he was, words—drama and poetry—were his chosen forms of expression until he ultimately communicated his madness with easily obtained guns and ammunition.

As consumers of products—video games, books, music and movies—containing violent images and themes, and the often-attendant sexism, my sons are sensitive to the common claims (some more well-founded than others) that people who share their tastes are prone to violence. So if you were concerned that my children were being constantly subjected to academic lectures and feminist dogma, let me assure you there is a fairly even exchange in our household—after all, there are two of them and only one of me. I've read more Neil Gaiman than I care to admit. I was persuaded by my sons (15 and 16 at the time) to take them to see Frank Miller's R-Rated *Sin City*, which I watched, eyes averted as I slunk further and further down into my chair, both in discomfort at watching sexploitation, dismemberment and torture with my children and embarrassment in having exercised such poor judgment.

But if I tried to ban everything that contained sexism or violence from their realm of choices, I would miss out on a lot of interesting cultural phenomenon in what I feel sure would be a losing battle. And the truth is that I share a lot of their tastes. As a child I was probably more addicted to super-hero comic books than my sons are now, so I read and enjoy those they recommend to me, especially updated versions of Marvel superheroes in series such as *The Ultimates* and from DC Comics the *Justice League of America* in graphic novels such as *Divided We Fall*. I am genuinely interested in

and often amazed at what they have learned about genre and graphic arts. I find the Cold War mentality of the Playstation videogame Metal Gear Solid intriguing and often watch the cinemas—short movies that advance the narrative of the game—with my sons while they play. I have always been a fan of war movies and westerns and don't shy away from movie violence, having cut my teeth on Arthur Penn's Bonnie and Clyde and developed a taste for Sam Pekinpah's movies as a teenager. So when they want to see a movie like Sin City, having already read the graphic novel standing in the aisles of Barnes and Noble, I express my concerns but trust their judgment. Sometimes I make mistakes.

Without this open exchange, however, my younger son might not have introduced me to Marjane Satrapi's first graphic novel Persepolis. More than reports in the news about head-scarf girls in Turkey or France, this book raised for him the issue of human rights for Muslim girls and women. Recently my sons and I watched in rapt attention a report on the PBS News Hour about Dr. Sunitha Krishnan, the founder of the Prajwala School in India, a school for girls infected with AIDS as a result of rape, incest, or prostitution. Dr. Krishnan became infected with AIDS when she was gang raped and subsequently found that there were few resources for her in India. Both of my sons were deeply moved by her story and voiced their admiration for the incredible strength she demonstrates in continually fighting off not only criticism for providing shelter and education for these girls, but also physical attack. She has been physically assaulted 14 times since opening the school in 1995. Our household is full of talk—politics, the arts, ethics and values—but not every moment leads to analysis or debate. Shortly before his death from a stroke in 2004, my sons' father, chronically unemployed and on the verge of becoming homeless, told them that he wished the Catholic Church had a job opening for a hit man to kill all the women who had had abortions. That was a job he'd like to have. When my older son tells me this, I am literally speechless. "That's crazy talk, isn't it?" he says.

"Yes," I answer quietly and draw him near. "It is." This is not a moment for a discussion of abortion rights, but merely for consolation.

When we watched Nancy Pelosi pound that gavel as the first woman to be elected Speaker of the House, I saw her in that way: the first woman. And while my sons recognize the significance of that fact, the event was equally meaningful to them because when Pelosi invited children to the podium, for the first time, they saw people like themselves in picture as well. At ages 16 and 17, my sons now have a far deeper and more global understanding of the lives of women and children than I did at their age. I feel certain that they would not use the word feminist to describe themselves, but nonetheless, they have a growing awareness of the fact that the welfare of children is often tied to the political power of women.

It has been almost a decade since our first discussion of Hillary Clinton when my older son asks, "Are you going to vote for Hillary Clinton because she's a woman?"

"I haven't decided who I'll vote for or why. I wouldn't vote for her just because she's a woman." But I do confess to him that the first time I was eligible to cast a vote was in the primary election of 1972. And I did vote for Linda Jenness of the Socialist Worker's Party precisely because she was a woman. And I still feel a certain amount of pride, while also acknowledging my naiveté, for voting this way.

Impressed by John Edwards's appearance at a labor rally for workers at UC Berkeley, my son decided to cast his first vote, in the 2008 primary, for this candidate, who represents to my son the ideas he considers to be at the core of differences between the Democratic and Republican Parties: a commitment to the working class and improving the lives of the poor and disenfranchised. My younger son, several years from voting age, is a fan of Barack Obama. As an

actor, my son finds Obama's presence impressive and believes that Obama represents a new direction; he tells me that baby-boomers are responsible for what is wrong with the world. We have a lot of heated discussions about this. Just as second-wave feminists did not make the world a perfect place for women and children, baby boomers did not rid the world of all the problems they pledged, as young idealistic people, to address.

Much work remains to be done. I would be lying if I said I wasn't looking for women to lead the way as the work continues. Who those women will be remains to be seen.

