

*Editor's note: Here are two little pieces for the parents among us, in honor of Mother's Day and Father's Day. Vicki Sairs wrote them years ago, and they originally appeared in **The Mobile Register**, Mobile, Alabama's daily newspaper.*

Mysterious forces

There we were, watching "The 6th Day" in our living room, feeling cozy and safe and fairly certain that somehow Arnold would save us all from the ee-vil clones who were plotting to take over the world. One small but creepy part of the film's futuristic setting was the popularity of a large, lifelike doll that could talk, move around and blink her eyes.

"Eww!" I said. "Who'd want to own a doll like that?"

Our boys wondered why I cared, and their father was quick to inform them. "Well, you know, Mom wasn't much into dolls when she was a little girl. She was mean to her dolls."

My sons were shocked, which I hope testifies to my subsequent rehabilitation. "Mom, what did you do to your dolls?"

This put me on the spot. "It was just one doll, not all of them. I really didn't like her, so I beat her with a yardstick and put her in the oven."

This confession was followed by brief howls of outrage, after which we went back to watching Arnie save the world.



• Arnold having a moment with the very creepy doll from *The 6th Day*.

But as Mother's Day approaches, I think about these things. What mysterious force turned me into a reasonably loving mother, who doesn't beat her children and stick them in the oven?

I didn't grow up daydreaming about being a good mommy. It wasn't even on my radar screen. My fantasies involved travel and adventures with recurrent themes: I was the center of the action; I invariably broke some precedent or rule (it was I, the feisty Candy Striper, who stood up to

grumpy Vince Edwards, a.k.a. Ben Casey); and my antagonist was always older, heroically handsome, and secretly in love with me.

Motherhood and children never entered the picture. I wasn't opposed to the idea, it just seemed like too big a topic to broach mentally. So on I went in a daze of youthful oblivion, never making the basic connection between my present actions and the fact that someday I would have to explain those hippie pictures to my embarrassed children.

What is most intriguing to me now is the way all of this changed—overnight, it seems. My husband and I had been married for a while. He was launching a career as a musician and I was having neurotic episodes as a graduate student and teaching assistant. We lived a wholesomely bohemian lifestyle, which involved lots of friends, lots of talk and lots of coffee. It was fun, but then we visited friends over Christmas, friends who were in a unique category—they had young children.

What mysterious force turned me into a reasonably loving mother, who doesn't beat her children and stick them in the oven?

We were surprised by how nice these children were to be around, and we noticed that their parents actually seemed to enjoy their company. Watching our friends with their babies changed us. Before, we'd had a dim idea that someday we'd have a family. Now, it became an imperative—just like that. Who'd have thought that parenthood was contagious?

We even had friends who caught it from us, and by the time our first child was born, we were at the epicenter of a mini-baby boom. We were also at the epicenter of our adult lives; babies sent changes rippling out from the core of who we were, and we can still feel the aftershocks.

I think the mysterious force that turned me into an OK mom is love. But there's more to it. The drive to have children goes deep, right into the part of us that says, "We have to do this to keep on living; we have to do this to save the world." Having babies and raising children is a way of saying yes to life; it's a way to reach into the future with both hands and rearrange it a little. That's so awe-inspiring, it's a good thing most parents are too tired to think about it.

Never surrender

If my husband and I were political figures, he would be Winston Churchill and I, regrettably, would be Neville Chamberlain. For those who slept through European history class, Churchill succeeded Chamberlain as prime minister of Great Britain in 1940, during the early days of World War II.

They were very different men. Chamberlain had an older brother who won the Nobel Peace Prize, and perhaps that explains why he himself was so eager for peace that he was able to support a policy of appeasement toward Nazi Germany. “Peace in our time” was a great phrase, and it’s sad that it has to echo with such irony down through the years.

Especially when it echoes in my living room, as it does on occasion. “You’re letting them watch another movie?” my husband will ask, astonished.

“Well, it’s just a short one, and they’ve been really good...” I’ll say, appeasingly.

“Ha, Mrs. Neville peace-in-our-time Chamberlain!” he’ll say, chomping down on his cigar. (Actually, he doesn’t smoke, but Churchill did, and we’re trying to draw a picture here.)

Really, he’s only like Churchill in the leadership aspects of his personality, and it’s a good thing, too. A family needs someone to lead it through its dark days and times of struggle, someone who knows how to offer “blood, toil, tears and sweat” and who believes in things like victory and finest hours.

“Ha, Mrs. Neville peace-in-our-time Chamberlain!” he’ll say . . .

He does that at our house, all the time. I reach my wits’ end very quickly, and he’s always there, encouraging me not to give up: “...we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end...”

Another way he’s like Sir Winston is in his ability to think strategically, an invaluable trait when you’re outnumbered by your children. If only I could stick to his battle



• Sir Winston Churchill, looking suitably focused.

plans, what an orderly home we would have: “...we shall fight in the kitchen, we shall fight at the dining room table, we shall fight in their bedrooms; we shall fight until they are civilized men...”

The longer I’ve known him, the more like Churchill I’ve become. My Chamberlain doesn’t seem to be wearing off on him at all, but we strike a good balance. You can’t always operate in World War II mode; it’s too demanding and heroic.

I take care of the lighter side of life – birthdays and movie nights and cakes baked for no reason in particular. I add the important element of nonsense to his existence, and he makes it possible for me to retain that ability, simply by letting me lean on him.

I think most couples who love each other are this way; they learn to relax into each other, knowing that one’s weaknesses can be offset by the other’s strengths. Most marriages seem to me to be counterpoint affairs: the husband plays one melody, the wife another, and when they learn to play the right notes, it is beautiful.

Of course, sometimes it sounds more like cacophony than polyphony, especially when children are learning their parts. The trick is to remember that it’s a joyful noise, and to keep playing.

The other trick is to keep your eyes on the prize. Churchill was famous for his two-fingered “V for victory” salute. My World Book says he flashed it everywhere he went during World War II, and that “this simple gesture became an inspiring symbol of faith in eventual victory.”

Raising a family can be like a battle, and it does take faith to believe that you can win. When I am at my pusillanimous worst, when I’m ready to give in and give up, I look at my husband and know what his words will be and what his actions will show: “We shall never surrender...”

Vicki Sairs lives with her husband Reuben in London, Ohio. They belong to London Christian Fellowship, work at RBC, and have three fine sons who did, after all, become “civilized men.”