

Writer Mama

By Lesa Knollenberg

I'M FILLING OUT FORMS, AND IT ISN'T EASY.
What is my vocation? How do I spend my days?
The employment field isn't long enough; my days
aren't that clear-cut.

I am a mom and a writer. Constructing both worlds is a large task, built on small moments. I do one, and I do the other. While cooking for one, I get lost in a dreamy world, massaging words for the other. While I'm buying toilet paper, I'm writing story ideas on the back of old receipts.

Parenting takes flexibility, quick thinking and broad strokes of creativity. Writing demands discipline, tenacity and clarity. Their major similarity? They both render you invisible. You work, hone and ship off kids/essays to the sound of silence. You rarely get an acknowledgement that your work has, indeed, been noticed. A postcard, maybe. "We received your submission. If we publish your work, you will be notified in six weeks." You wait the six weeks knowing that it really means "your children are unmanageable and your metaphors infantile."

The hard work of parenting nets little positive feedback. You hear, mind you, if your kid has screwed up. But you don't hear a chorus of praise for the gritty work of parenting. The hard part — staying home when the kids don't deserve a promised movie, saying no to television or computer games during the week — you feel all alone on that front.

Most of my work leaves no mark; it all takes place in my head. If you know me, you know that's dangerous. This is why I exercise. When my little brain gets tired of its own vacuous thoughts bouncing off each other, I go for a run. A little music, a little sunshine, a dose of endorphins, and I've figured out a new strategy for sibling bickering or the ending to my short story. Moving helps me think, reprioritize.

If it's been a long, quiet day, hubby and friends busy at their own work, I head to an exercise class. There I can sweat next to the regulars, wonderful women I admire who run businesses and chase toddlers and know how great it feels to



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move around together. Sometimes we don't even talk; we're there to get better, but getting better next to each other is grounding.

After I get my people fix, calm my brain and am ready to be productive, I'm reminded that both my jobs offer this magnificent benefit: moments of naked quiet. If I get out of my own way and let things happen, the small moments pay off.

Moments like the one a few years ago when, just because it was a particularly sunny autumn day, we left the house early to walk to school. We found a dead mouse, flat on the sidewalk. It sparked a lengthy discussion about death, heaven, animals and belief. My son squatted and inspected, then asked, "Where's his Momma?" as if to say that if she had been there, this wouldn't have happened. "She's with him," I assured my son. "She's always with him, even if you can't see her."

About the time I experience stretches of doubt with this invisible writer-mama gig, I am seen. An article is published, and I feel vindicated and productive for approximately 28 hours; then I'm back to searching the help-wanted ads for a "really useful" job. A good report card comes home, and in the middle of patting myself on the sore back, the teacher calls to discuss my son; apparently, singing "I like big butts and I cannot lie" in the middle of recess gets him noticed. I have a magazine deadline, but the teacher can see me at 1 p.m. today. I do one, and I do the other. But first I go for a run. **mb**

Lesa Knollenberg lives, works and tries to keep things simple just outside of Madison.