

Serving Up Kisses, Not Feasts

My daughters are precious to me, but I don't want to fix them dinner. Does that mean I don't love them enough?

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I read obituaries. Obits, like short stories, distill the essence of the dearly departed in sincere, succinct prose. Obits can entertain, educate, even inspire. But some obits make me cringe, grimace and sigh. I hang my head in shame when I read the obituaries of women who—as living, breathing, warm-hearted mothers—loved to cook for their families. Lines about "accomplished cooks" who "loved to feed family and friends" are guilt inducing. And, occasionally, I come across an obit that describes a mother who reached a pinnacle to which I cannot even begin to aspire: "gourmet cook."

Obituaries about mothers who nurtured their offspring with selfless culinary devotion really hit me hard. I am a late-in-life mother. My children are precious to me. I love them with embracing, ferocious passion. I just don't want to fix them dinner. Does that mean I don't love them enough?

For a long time, I worried that no matter how hard I tried, I would only achieve the status of a pretty-good mother because the best moms—like mine—were those who cooked for their families. In a tremendously revealing conversation, my mother confessed to me recently that she had cooked for my sisters and me not just because she enjoyed it but to demonstrate her love. Not overtly affectionate, it was the only way she knew how to touch us emotionally. She did add, though, that she also found cooking dinner a good stress reducer and a great creative outlet.

Cooking dinner a stress reducer? I am still filled with dread and despair just trying to envision five, six or— heaven forbid—seven nightly meals. Seven attempts to dazzle, amaze or just plain feed my expectant family—multiplied by almost 20 years. The thought makes me yearn for the days when feeding my two daughters meant opening delicate little glass jars and delivering spoonfuls of bright, jewel-tone creamy concoctions into their eager toothless mouths.

As for being a creative outlet—yes, there was a time when I actually looked forward to sharing my favorite dinner menus, carried over from my premarital days, with my wonderful brood. That is, until my kids started turning their noses up at every masterpiece I placed before them. Who knew a 2-year-old wouldn't gobble up eggplant chickpea cilantro salad? Or Asian chicken cilantro salad? Or just plain old salad?

Don't get me wrong. There are some aspects of fixing dinner that I look forward to with pleasant anticipation. I relish shopping for my family's food. As it turns out, grocery shopping is my one legitimate excuse to spend money, so I spare no expense when it comes to stocking the cupboards, refrigerator and freezer with nutritious, delicious fare.

I am filled with deep contentment when I look at the bowls on my kitchen counter overflowing with colorful apples, bananas, tangerines, avocados and tomatoes. I take pride in the fact that I have slowly, but persistently, instituted the 80/20 rule in my home: 80 percent healthy, organic fruits, veggies, milk and meat; 20 percent junk. I can live with that, and so can my husband and kids.

I love the vision of my kitchen brimming with life-nourishing food. I just can't stand the idea of being responsible for transforming all that food into a magnificent new meal every night.

As my kids have grown older, more daring and frankly tired of my whining, they have started experimenting more with meal preparation. And I am always happy to eat their attempts.

My husband, bless him, is happy to eat just about anything. So he often finds the most "left behind" leftovers gracing his plate on the evenings when the rest of us have moved on. My husband, bless him again, has

also started to find his own creative muse in the kitchen. His reference book—the 1951 edition of "The Joy of Cooking"—means we commonly find ingredients like Crisco and Velveeta on the dinner table. But I've got to love him for trying (even if it tests the limits of the 80/20 rule).

Some mothers may fix dinner with a song in their hearts and pure love spilling from their fingertips. I've come to accept that I serve up hugs and kisses, not feasts. But I've also realized that cooking alone doesn't make you a great mother. It's the demonstration of love that's important—no matter how you serve it up.

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