



By Caryn Sullivan

Join the Crowd, Imperfect Mom

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The bags were packed, the boarding passes printed. My passport rested on my desk, unopened since I last used it two years ago. Months of planning this save-my-sanity getaway would soon culminate in an escape from a frigid, gloomy winter. Hours before our scheduled departure, my husband breezed into my office, picked up my passport and stared at it, until he finally whispered, "Did you realize your passport expired two weeks ago?"

I had spent hours on the Internet reading traveler reviews to ensure that I picked just the right spot and got the very best deal. I had retrieved my passport from the lock box but never thought to actually open it. In my quest to ensure we stayed at a safe and affordable resort with good food and potable water, I overlooked the one detail that was crucial to the trip.

The die cast, we had limited options. I could subject myself to a flogging. My husband could take the two teenage girls who eagerly awaited the trip to Puerto Vallarta and leave me at home, or we could make a new plan.

Roughly 12 hours later, the four of us emerged from our plane, tired but transported. Having survived the dreadful winter by dreaming of the lush tropical forest of Puerto Vallarta, I found myself staring at the dusty brown desert of Phoenix, Arizona, with little enthusiasm. For months, I had carried a different picture in my mind.

Formulated in just a few hours, the details of the trip to Phoenix were as slapdash as those of the trip to Puerto Vallarta were meticulous. And yet, we had a great time, mostly because my fellow travelers were determined to make it so. I had little choice but to follow their lead and enjoy the lovely resort I had never heard of before I checked in for the week.

It is probably not a bad thing that I made the mistake. We did not fly into the eye of the swine flu storm. We did our part as American consumers and spent our discretionary dollars domestically. But more importantly, I came face to face with the reality that, try as I might to be bullet-proof, I am, in fact, an imperfect mom. It is a humbling reminder, but one that is important for me — and my daughters — to take note of. For there is a lot of pressure to be a perfect mom and to have perfect children.

Every day mothers lose dreams that are far more important than vacationing in Mexico and wonder why. A mother of an only child learns he prefers men to women, and mourns the loss of the traditional extended family she had anticipated. Another mother grieves when her unwed teenage daughter gives birth and drops out of school, rendering longstanding college plans a remote possibility. Yet another watches helplessly as her once happy child struggles with drugs or depression, and perhaps even suicide.

I've learned the painful way that even if I follow the rules, I may not get the expected outcome. During my pregnancies I did what I was told to do to have healthy babies. I did not drink or smoke; I ate pretty well, got my rest and managed my stress.

Once they were born, I followed all medical protocols. I made sure they were well fed, well rested, well loved and wanted for nothing. So I never imagined that, before my eyes, my son would evolve from a normal chatty baby to a hyperactive, speechless toddler with autism or that my daughter would have chemotherapy before she got braces.

At times, I have been plagued by the question — "How could this have happened — I did everything I was supposed to do?" Fortunately, I have been blessed to have a faith, as well as family and friends, to steer me away from the question that could destroy me if allowed to; for I will never have the answer. Humility has served as an antidote to the anger, guilt and doubt that have competed for my energy.

I've had too many experiences now to ignore the obvious lesson. If I think I can (and must) control everything around me, that I can protect my kids from forces that are larger than me, then my life will be full of acrimony. But if I can accept that I am imperfect, that I cannot control everything that happens to my children, and choose to make the best of the adversity that is inevitable, then I can live life with a peaceful heart, even if I end up in Phoenix.

For that lesson, I feel especially blessed on this Mother's Day.

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