

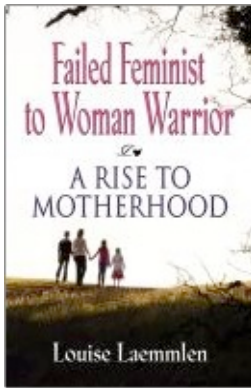
Failed Feminist to Woman Warrior



A RISE TO
MOTHERHOOD



Louise Laemmlen



*In **FAILED FEMINIST TO WOMAN WARRIOR: A Rise to Motherhood**, Louise Laemmlen offers an irreverent glance into parenthood. When she begins to realize that becoming a mother is a "demotion" in the eyes of the working world, she struggles to craft a new identity for herself. Her memoir can help you navigate the territory of family life and the unexpected pitfalls, while honoring your children and landing on your own two feet at the end.*

FAILED FEMINIST TO WOMAN WARRIOR

A Rise to Motherhood

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A Rise to Motherhood

Louise Laemmlen

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Reject! This Resume Does Not Fit the Job Description

So, when did I stop being a child and add “Mom” to my curriculum vitae? When did I begin to realize that, to be successful at anything (even to become a mom) I would have to work very hard and persevere? I did not inherently have the skill set it takes to be a good parent. The following is a version of my CV. Does it say anywhere, *qualified to be an excellent parent*?

I am a woman.

I have a Master’s degree in English Literature from California Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo, California.

I have traveled. I have worked for *Cosmopolitan* magazine in Taipei, Taiwan where I met *Cosmo*’s editor and founder, Helen Gurley Brown. I spent two days with Helen and David Brown partying out and about in Taipei. I later attended Helen’s 50th Anniversary Gala for *Cosmo* in New York City, spoke to Barbara Walters, listened to Beverly Sills sing, mapped out my career path with Marcelle D’Argy Smith, the editor at that time of *Cosmo* UK, and rubbed shoulders with Diane Sawyers.

When I moved to New York to find a job in publishing, the headhunters smirked, “and your Master’s...? Isn’t that a *technical* school?” I was offered several receptionist positions at worthy magazines and even an editorial assistant job at Harlequin. Other young women less green to the world of New York City publishing would have been pleased. In retrospect, they were good offers. Corporate publishing in the Big Apple is a hierarchical ladder that you climb from the bottom rung (unless you edited the *Daily Princetonian*, perhaps), but I was insulted. Still thinking like a child, I wanted to be a “Master of the Universe,” like Helen. She had defined her path from the outset by publishing Sex and the Single Girl in which she charted a new way of thinking for women, describing how they could become financially independent and enjoy their sexuality with or without marriage.

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I got an Advanced Certificate of Teaching from Pace University in New York. I became a teacher. At least in my own classroom I could be in charge. I taught English for three years in a suburban high school in Westchester County, New York. In those three years I taught ninth, tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grade courses, supervised the Drama Club and the school newspaper, created a monthly "Poetry Café" for my amazing students, and was offered a seat on the Steering Committee for the annual conference of the New York State English Council.

Then I got pregnant.

Now I am nobody, except a mom. Who are you?

Whoever you were before, you are now, or are soon to be Somebody's Mother. Whatever your career was before, you are now going to begin the job of so many nobodies. For me "Mother" was a job description for a nobody; I did not relate to it at all because of its misconstrued image as angelic, giving, and mature, qualities which do not fit me. But, in the eyes of a little child, motherhood is the most important job. Here is the call to service:

Job description: Raise a decent human being

Boss: You

Skill set: Every skill you have gained since your own birth

Tasks: Endless

Manual: None

Salary: Zero.

Recently, *San Francisco* magazine carried an article about how the recession has forced stay-at-home-moms back into the work place. The author's argument was well researched and accurately expressed; women should not squander their valuable education and work experience on staying at home when the marketplace needs them. She was perhaps gloating a bit that she had elected to stay in the game while many stay-at-home-moms have become soft, forgoing their hard earned skills to wipe babies' butts. Now they have to suck it up and get back to work as a weak economy has whittled down or even cut off their husbands' earnings. I had to agree with her, really. Women should keep their skills sharp with the assumption that opportunities will be there for them when they are ready to return to

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work. I'm looking forward to getting back into my profession as soon as I can, and frequently fantasize about the freedom (physical and intellectual) that it will afford me. Even as a stay-at-home-mom (with only the tiniest chip on my shoulder), I enjoyed the article and had to smile when she poked fun at out of touch moms sitting in motivational "get back to work" seminars. But, right near the end, there was one point where I had to take umbrage. She wrote that, regarding how much work we need to do to fix our country, our economy, and our planet, "it seems wrong to waste a single person or idea."¹ The assumption is that being at home to raise our children is a waste of our time and ideas. Wow. What does that say about how we value our children? This attitude is everywhere in our society. It's why I had to write my mom story down. Being a mom is by far the hardest job I will ever have. Yet almost everybody does it, so we assume that it must not take much skill. In fact, I feel it takes so much skill to do it well that I'm constantly failing at it. That failure and that struggle are what I share here.

I wish someone had given me a very realistic picture about parenting instead of those ridiculously perky articles in the parenting magazines. But, nobody wants to talk about the ugliness of inappropriate emotions. Anger, boredom, frustration, dislike are not words we like to associate with the care of our beautiful kids. I outgrew those magazines by the time my oldest daughter was about four and stopped reading them, but I hope that by now they are starting to direct some of their content toward dads, too.

Writing this memoir I came to understand how important it is for women to assert themselves in the workplace and in the partnerships in which they are raising children. I came to realize that my husband and I should have found a way to keep me employed while raising kids instead of completely backing off my career for the family. When I was almost finished writing this book I came across Penelope Leach's Children First. How I wish I had read it when my first daughter was a baby. Published sixteen years ago, it asks that we recognize the importance of respecting the differences between women and men in the ways we approach the raising of our children and our roles in the workplace. She states that, "now that women have

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proved their ability to play by men's rules, perhaps we should turn our attention to raising the status of a female league so that men can similarly demonstrate their ability to play by women's rules and we can evolve new games of egalitarian diversity"². This is what I hope for. I see this happening all around me in the new millennium: dads carrying their babies in slings and backpacks into the drugstore to stock up on household necessities while their wives are away at paid work, doing pick up, drop off, commandeering the onslaught of after school activities. But Leach's book is over *sixteen years old*, and the ratio of dads to moms doing this type of work is about 2 to 12 (judging from my unofficial survey around town). The issue is, I want to champion women who stay at work, but we still haven't found good solutions for what to do with our kids while we're away all day.

Should I Be a Stay-at-Home-Mom?

I didn't think much about what good parenting might involve before having kids (Al claims that he did). What I remember about our decision to have a baby is this: Al and I had been married for six blissful years. And I mean *blissful*. Please remember I said that as this memoir unfolds. We were living in New York. We were having fun and working hard. We'd bought our first little house, an adorable Tudor in Westchester County, just 30 minutes north of Manhattan. We'd even saved enough to buy an adorable, blue 3 series BMW. It was a big jump from our first car, the tinny, box-like Nissan we'd bought second hand from our friends. The BMW was *new*, fast, and cute! But when we weren't driving it, all it did was sit in the driveway. I began to think of it as The Shiny Box of Metal. After owning it for several months, Al and I discussed this with some chagrin. Other than a gratifying rush of speed, it didn't give much back. We came to the same conclusion at about the same time: *Maybe it's time to have a baby!* Incidentally, this kind of immature joie de vivre and willingness to make huge, life-impacting decisions over a glass of wine (or two) would describe, at least thus far, how I had lived much of my life. (Notice also the correlation between a baby and a possession.)

When it came time to decide whether or not I would stay at home with the baby...well, how much thought did I put into it? At the time, it seemed, not much more than we had put into the decision to have the little creature in the first place. But, I had probably been making that decision subconsciously my whole life. I knew instinctively that, for me, trying to work a full time job was anomalous to trying to raise a family. I knew, and statistics confirm, that as the woman in the house I would be doing most of the housework, managing the affairs of the baby, *and* working a paid job. Back then, Al and I were not the kind of people who would think of hiring a lot of help to garden, cook, do laundry, raise the kids, and manage the house to free us up to pursue careers. What I wasn't aware of was the psychological cost of

being a stay-at-home-mom in a society that values only position and earning potential.

Since then, I have asked myself this question so many times: Why did I decide *not* to go back to work right away after having kids and keep my professional position in society? The answer to that question is complicated and will differ for every woman. But for me, it has quite a bit to do with the media images of women that I grew up with. In some of my favorite shows, “Alice” and “Laverne & Shirley” if the woman had a family and was working, she was independent and strong, but completely exhausted and strung out. If they were single and working, they were basically looking for a desirable man to whisk them away to a future of love and security. I did believe I needed a man to keep me secure. My mother had always told my sister and me that we had better be sure we had university degrees so that we could support ourselves. But, there was a subtext that read: “but that’s really only in an emergency.”

Remember those two days with Helen Gurley Brown in Taipei? Her assessment of me at the time had been, “You’re spunky and bright.” She wondered what I was going to do with myself after my stint in Taipei. I told her about my ideas for a teen magazine. I was only 22, after all, barely out of my teenage years. I was always concerned about the paucity of interesting reading directed at young adults. I wanted to create a meaty, topical magazine filled with politics, relevant history, travel, and international news. But, somewhere lurking in the depths of my heart, I was probably just thinking, “Well, I’ll get married and have a family.” At that time, I hadn’t even met Al.

Helen was already grandma age when I met her. I was so surprised when she told me she didn’t have any kids. *Was that an option?*

I asked her naively, “Why not?”

“I never wanted any,” she replied coolly.

She went on to say something about how she knew that decision would change her life in ways she didn’t want. Here she was, with her tiny little figure, and powerhouse publishing career behind her, the originator of Sex and the Single Girl.

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How could she have known?

Not long ago, my aunt sent me this hilarious little piece over the Internet. It came to her from her sister who has four children, five grandchildren, and is married to a retired Lt. Colonel. She has moved 27 times, including at least two international assignments (that's with four kids, remember).

THE WORLD'S SHORTEST FAIRY TALE:

Once upon a time, a Guy asked a Girl, "Will you marry me?" The Girl said "NO!" And the Girl lived happily ever after, never had children, went shopping, dancing, drank martinis, ate chocolate, always had a clean house, never had to cook, did whatever the hell she wanted, never argued, didn't have to worry about her weight, traveled more, had many lovers, didn't save money, and had all the hot water to herself. She went to the theatre, never watched sports, never wore friggin' lacy lingerie that went up her ass, had high self esteem, never cried or yelled, felt and looked fabulous in sweat pants, and was pleasant all the time.

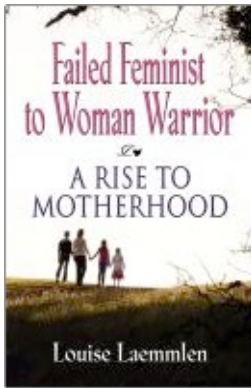
THE END

Ah, Helen! Married yes, children, no. How I've envied you since having my family! She jet-setted back to New York after the Taipei Cosmo launch; I would see her only once again at the magazine's 50th Anniversary Gala in New York. I stayed in Taipei, working, traveling, going dancing, having gratuitous sex, then, about a month later, in a night club in Taipei called Roxy II, I met Al.

As exciting and totally fun as my life before marriage and kids was, I lied. I really don't envy Helen. Her early ability to know herself, yes, but not her ultimate choices. I've struggled with the enormity of my job as mom many times. But I've never for a minute regretted having children with the man of my dreams (sometimes nightmares, but still...). Helen chose a different path, and I respect her mightily for that. I find that kind of self-knowledge admirable.

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The thing I have to ask is, why is Helen “Somebody” for making the decision to pursue her career in publishing instead of having children, and I feel like a nobody because I chose to make my kids my job? The fundamental truth about our society is that having and rearing babies is completely undervalued and continues to be largely the province of women. Women across America know this. Nevertheless, they are determinedly pushing their exercise strollers, heading to “Baby Wonderful” class, cooking nutritious meals for their families, being executors of discipline and manners, and doing the best job they know how at an occupation that no one really seems to think of as a job.



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