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Literary GOF Finalist 2002

ARTISTIC RESPONSE

"Five hundred a year stands for the power to contemplate . . . a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself."

Five hundred a year and a lock on the door. A lock, in my case, is not enough. I need soundproofing too, and vibration proofing. Even when I wear earplugs, I can still tell from the thumps I feel through the floor exactly what's going on in the next room. I need a room somewhere else, away from my kids, a room with access to a toilet and a hotplate. There's a widow in town with a big empty house. If I could afford it, I'd ask her to rent me a writing room. To be able to leave! To write in peace and quiet! Well, I do leave, when I can. I take my laptop to the library or a friend's house while she's at work. But today, like many days, leaving is not an option. I need my printer, which isn't easy to move around, and my friend is home with a cold, and the library doesn't open until afternoon. I can't go this afternoon because I'm scheduled to take Daisy, my five-year-old, to a dentist appointment and then to her dance class. Doug can't cover for me all day because he needs to clock at least a few hours at his job. We need the money, I need the time, and how does anybody ever get all these pieces in balance?

In the years before I had kids, I'd have used a day like today (sunny spring weather, a writing project waiting for me) to take a long walk in the woods and let my thoughts wander among the wildflowers that grow in the underbrush before the leaves fill in and block the sunlight. (I used to make an effort to learn their names, but it's been years since I've had time to check my field guides.) I'd meander home, maybe nap, and then sit down at my desk, refreshed, in tune with my thoughts, and write for as long as I wanted. Now, writing happens, when it happens, in these brief, interrupted hours I squeeze between my freelance work and my children's needs. Time for daydreaming, for letting the mind follow its intuitive logic, is rare and precious.

To be a writer of genius, according to Woolf, you need privacy and time for contemplation. Her solution is to be rich, to be born to wealth or be the recipient of a generous windfall. I don't argue with her that money makes all the difference in an artist's freedom. But in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf doesn't address how to integrate children into the writer's life. In my twenties, when I first read her book, I failed to notice her oversight. Now it seems so obvious. Though she doesn't say this directly, by omission she makes it clear: A writer of genius, at least if she is a woman, has no children. Where does that leave me?

For years I believed the myth that a woman could not be simultaneously an artist and a mother. I put off having children because I was convinced that motherhood would end my life as an artist, and art was my priority. Then, all of a sudden, I decided to get pregnant, and did. Throughout my pregnancy I agonized over what I'd done. What would happen to my writing? What would happen to my life?

What happened when Daisy was born I never would have predicted. It was harder to find time to write, but when I had the time, I wrote without hesitating. I began taking risks. I began to trust my voice. I liked what I wrote more than I ever had before. I realized I had been so wrong. Of course I could be a writer and a mother.

My kids have made me a better writer. They've made me more ambitious, more productive, and taught me to use my time well—procrastination is a luxury I can't afford. They have given me knowledge of myself and insight into the complexity of relationships. They have given me simple love—unconditional, healing love. This is far more than they take from me. I don't want to romanticize motherhood. It's a hard job, an irritating, taxing job. You never get enough sleep, there are no

vacations, and the pay sucks. But the payoff is enormous. Motherhood is a process of continual growth. What artist wouldn't want that?

WHAT DOES YOUR ART MEAN TO YOU? [EXCERPTS]

But I'm not naive. I know that sometimes the world isn't interested in the gifts that artists offer. I know that in our capitalist culture, that turns everything into a commodity and confuses an audience with a market, it can be very difficult for the giver and the receiver to appreciate the real nature of the connection between them, or even to find each other. Even though these are problems every artist has to grapple with, we keep making art for the world because we have to, because the world needs it, whether it knows it or not. . . .

My mother was a painter, a very good one, but she set her art aside to marry and raise a family. When her children were grown she took up painting again, then set it aside to marry a second time and devote herself to her husband's needs. Later still, when she was widowed and had ample income and leisure, she set aside her painting to decorate her houses. When she was diagnosed with cancer, she had four paintings finished. They are wonderful paintings, admired by highly qualified curators, but they were just the beginning of what she might have accomplished. On her deathbed, she gathered her children around her and gave us some parting advice. Her words to me were "Get to work. Don't waste any time."
