

Circle of Mercy, Circle of Love

In *The Secret Life of Bees*, Sue Monk Kidd writes, “The world will give you that once in awhile, a brief timeout; the boxing bell rings and you go to your corner, where somebody dabs mercy on your beat-up life.”

When I first read those lines, I was on Day 3 of bedrest at the 25th week of pregnancy with my first child, which was about when any restfulness in “bedrest” gave way to worry and stir-craziness. Mercifully, the bedrest order was lifted after a couple of weeks. Now that the “baby” I was awaiting at the time is eleven years old (!) and has a seven-year-old brother who, like him, lives life on the autism spectrum, the passage captures something important about the Mother’s Circle hosted by the Women’s Table every month.

To the Mother’s Circle, I bring the concerns that come with the priceless gift of raising two boys who encounter the world so much differently than the rest of us. It is restful, like having mercy dabbled on the beat-up aspects of life, to be among women who understand how calls to the insurance company can eat up a whole, entire day when you had other responsibilities or how small chores like getting haircuts or buying school shoes can drain every last ounce of energy you had, and who do not assume that your child’s four-alarm meltdown in a Little League game means that you are the worst parent to walk the earth or, worse, that your child should be shunned and excluded. The women at the Mother’s Circle arrive every month with so much love to share and courage to inspire as they love their own children through challenges that are sometimes similar and sometimes so much more daunting than mine, that when I leave, I know that mercy has surrounded me and will still surround me whenever another bell rings and a new round begins.

But the boxing imagery falls short of describing all that the Mother’s Circle gives, because the women there also understand the joy and the wonder that come, not in spite of the challenges our children face, but precisely through and because of those challenges. They understand how the world will never again look the same as it did before our children began to lead us to lives we could not have imagined otherwise. They understand that we all received a precious gift early –the gift of realizing that our children are not the people we might have expected but rather are their very own inimitable selves—a realization that all parents must come to eventually, but since we came to it when our children were small rather than when they were rebelling adolescents, we get so many more years of *knowing* our children *as they are*, and not as we imagine they are.

Together at the Mother’s Circle, we remind each other that a lot of the time, life feels broken in so many ways, but that the “broken” is exactly where the beauty lies. We remind each other that “blessed and broken” is not a cycle or an infinite loop (first comes a blessing, and then we break, and then a blessing comes, and then we break again), but rather that thanks to our children and to each other, “blessed and broken” is the one, inseparable state in which we, live, and move, and have our being.