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February 6th, 2025

Prof. McCarthy

Identity Essay

## Motherhood

Most people say motherhood changes you but if you ask me, it's only for the better. Let's be honest when we all think of moms we imagine the stereotypical cartoon. A middle-aged woman with bags under her eyes, frumpy clothes, coffee in hand, with a bunch of wild kids running around while she's talking about how exhausted she is. It's okay to have that image in your head, because sometimes we do look like that. What I start to struggle with is the negative context that comes with that image. "Get sleep while you can." "Oh, get used to it. That's your new normal." "You really have your hands full." If you're a mom you've probably heard these comments before, and if you're not a mom, maybe you have said them to someone without realizing it's kind of a put down. I am hoping that I can paint a picture for why we should be a little kinder to the tired, messy haired moms. To help highlight the joys of motherhood and why I wouldn't trade the bags under my eyes and extra coffee in hand for anything. Motherhood is challenging and empowering all at the same time. It makes the things that once seemed ordinary feel magical. I wasn't feeling anything new when I became a mother, I just began to feel things more deeply.

I struggled to feel like I had a purpose before becoming a mom. It wasn't that I was doing poorly in life, but getting pregnant gave me the good kick in the butt I didn't know I needed. If you met me four years ago, you probably would have thought I had it made. I was well into my career, driving my dream car and could afford just about anything I wanted. I went out with

friends and traveled whenever and wherever I wanted. I always knew I wanted to be a mom, just not yet. I didn't want to "ruin" what I had going, because you know, that's what people say happens when you have kids. Your life as you know it ends. Even though I had almost everything I wanted, I reached the point where I found myself asking, "What's all this for?" I shrugged this off as a quarter life crisis like any other twenty-something year old would and kept going about my life. After what I thought was going to be a routine checkup with my doctor, I found myself asking those questions again, this time in a much more serious context. I vividly remember sitting in my OBGYNs office as he diagnosed me with PCOS, polycystic ovarian syndrome. I had heard of it before, but the words coming out of his mouth sounded like mush. He finished the appointment with the words "Don't worry. There are lots of ways we can help you get pregnant if you ever decide you want to." Obviously, I went home to doctor google and read the countless traumatizing blog posts from women struggling with infertility because of their PCOS. The first thing that came to mind: "What if I never get to be a mom and experience all the 'terrible' things that come with having kids?! I know I said not now, but what if it was actually not ever? If I could never become a mom, what would I do with my life?" I had almost come to terms with the situation and accepted my fate when just four months after my "diagnosis" I found myself unexpectedly pregnant. On one hand, I thought about how blessed I was that I got pregnant naturally without the help of my doctor, and, on the other hand the only words I could form were "WTF my life is over..."

Now I'm not saying you need to have a child to find your life's purpose but so often we hear that kids slow our lives down, and although that is true, it isn't a dreadful thing. Sometimes slowing down to enjoy and appreciate things instead of just flying through life is exactly what we need. Learning how to appreciate the phase we are in instead of always worrying about what's next. Having my daughter did slow me down. Having my daughter did change my life. I traded

in my dream car for a mom SUV. I quit working. I no longer had a busy social life or free time to travel. My money went to things like diapers and formula instead of designer bags or the trendiest shoes and somehow, I was okay with it. I can see where I might have lost you with that one, you're probably thinking "Ain't no way I am giving up \_\_\_\_\_ to buy some diapers" but I am telling you, my daughter changed my life in the best way possible. It was like she came out, but two new people were born. I instantly felt like "This is it. This is what I was missing. I was meant to be her mom and absolutely nothing else matters."

My newfound self-worth and confidence came to a screeching halt from a good ol thing called postpartum depression. If you know, you know. After the newborn shock wore off (for both me and her) I again found myself lost, questioning who I was. I was trying to find myself, only this time instead of looking forwards, I was looking back. I tried doing my make-up the same as I used to or dressing the same and wishing I had the same social life and on and on and on. Eventually I started to feel like a doll, being tugged in different directions. Being pulled to the point where all the limbs were going to tear off and only the pieces and shell of a doll would be left. News flash: my limbs did come flying off, and I was in denial about it. I found myself sitting in that same doctor's office where I received my PCOS diagnosis a year prior, telling my doctor I was doing great and thriving. This man looked at me like my hair was on fire. Obviously, I was the only one believing what I was saying. I had to come to terms with the fact that I was NOT "thriving", but instead barely surviving. Once I came to terms with this new reality and fully gave into mom life, I haven't looked back since.

You'll hear people say you're never the same after having kids and I'll agree. My hips are wider and some of my jeans never fit again, I had to accept that as a hard loss *lol*. I have stretch marks that have faded but will never fully go away. Ultimately, I was left with this shell of the person I used to be and the opportunity to become a better version of myself. I don't know why I

spent so much time looking backwards after having my daughter, like I wasn't struggling before too, and why people say you'll never be the same in such a negative way. Once I started leaning into motherhood, I felt empowered with a sense of self and drive mixed in with all the chaos and messiness. I realized that it was okay to look a little disheveled, I was up all night with the baby. It was okay that I wasn't a "boss babe" taking names and making money, I am a mom raising a tiny human and that is more than enough.

My sister-in-law had my niece in November of 2024. Little miss Leighton Paige stole my new auntie heart in a way I cannot describe. From the second my sister-in-law told me she was pregnant I felt this unwavering support for her. This sense of protection, not yet for the baby but for my sister-in-law. I wanted to protect her from all the negative things people will say about motherhood. Unlike in my pregnancy, when I found out about my sister-in-law, I didn't have the feeling that her life was over, I felt excited for her. I thought about all the amazing experiences she was going to have because of this little baby. I got to experience it on the other side, and I still to this day cannot imagine ever saying something negative to her about becoming or being a mom. Yes, motherhood has its moments, you'll regularly find yourself questioning if you are cut out to raise tiny humans, but that's just part of it. Being a mom, you learn how to pour from an empty cup. No matter how tired or burnt out you are, you keep going. The disheveled appearance and sleepless nights somehow always end up being worth it. I now do my best to make my sister in law's hard days a little easier. I say encouraging things, making sure she knows how great she is doing, telling her it's okay to struggle and feel a little lost. I try to build her up in the community of motherhood instead of tearing it down. The hormones and huge life changes are enough for any person to feel in over their head. We need to be kind to women in motherhood, not judgmental. You won't know what it's like till you're in their shoes, or should I say until you're the one in the frumpy clothes with bags under your eyes and a messy bun. Think about it:

how would you want people to treat you? Motherhood changes a person, but then again it might just be for the better.