

A Moment of Grace

Twenty-six years ago, I was a new mother with a beautiful, yet challenging baby boy, Jordan. Amid the chaos and unpredictability of that first year of his life, there were two things Carl and I knew with certainty: Jordan didn't take no for an answer, and Jordan never gave up.

From his first breath, our precious boy was volatile and ornery. He would thrash angrily whenever we would try to change his diaper (yes, it took a team of two), as if he were furious at being disturbed. Similarly, he would rage when I switched him to the other breast during feedings. It was clear that this was a boy who was going to fight to have things his own way. As he grew up, he had a lot to say, and was easily infuriated when we couldn't decipher what he was trying to tell us.

He seemed so uninterested in pleasing us that, at one point, I worried that he might be a sociopath. When he would construct a tower out of blocks, Carl and I might say, "Wow! Look at that great tower you've built!" Unlike other kids, he glared back, and in one swift motion crashed the tower to the ground. He instantly caught onto the warm fuzzies, baby talk, and hollow praises many parents are quick to award their kids, and wanted no part of it. He has always been a steadfast contrarian. As he grew, he would never buy into conventional wisdom. To this day, Jordan makes his own observations and builds his own truths before accepting anyone else's. He definitely hears his own drummer.

I had long dreamed of being a mom. I have always adored kids and spent many years as the top neighborhood babysitter, fully booked due to my great competence, enthusiasm, and deep connection with children. Motherhood would surely be even better, I imagined, with my own precious child to nurture. The reality, however, was something quite different altogether.

Returning to Jordan's first year, the relentlessness of parenthood and dealing with his unpredictability were taking their toll. Between the exhaustion, post-partum hormonal imbalances, and my expectations, it was overwhelming, and I started feeling like a failure. Resentment crept in, which led to even less patience, even though more patience was needed. I felt doomed to an exhausting vicious cycle. I foresaw years of pushing and getting pushed back. But, a moment of grace changed my life forever.

How ironic that my own mother was the catalyst for this moment of grace. At the time Jordan was born, we had a decent relationship. You might say we were in a period of détente. Growing up, though, our relationship had been explosive. As a child, I felt like I couldn't do anything right, and I didn't understand why. I was smart, a hard-working student, and was well liked in school and the neighborhood. Each day, I tried to prove my worth to her, but invariably, something I said or did seemed to affect her like nails on a chalkboard. Conflicts flared at every turn. For instance, I loved wearing the latest clothing styles, but my mother was a firm believer in hand-me-downs, and I felt ashamed, believing that I was

vain and superficial. When I would save up my babysitting money to buy my own clothes, she would tell me I was "fraternizing away" my money. At age ninety-one, she remembered and told me the story of how, at age seven, she had been shamed by her mother for wanting a brand new, beautiful gray corduroy dress. In retrospect, I wasn't the overly vain one — she thought she was.

To avoid rubbing her the wrong way, I did what all children do: I assumed something was wrong with me and I tried to hide whatever it was. Trying to keep myself contained was a struggle, though. I had a big personality. I was too much. Feeling so misunderstood, I would rage when she would frustrate me.

To be sure, the family circumstances around my birth were tragic and challenging. Mom was overwhelmed and depressed, having been widowed two months before I was born. She was thirty-three years old, and had three children and a newborn.

When my intense personality began to emerge as a toddler, I became a thorn in her side. I was the squeaky wheel, always making my needs and desires known. "Why can't you just be like the others?" she would ask. The question itself filled me with shame. There was something wrong with being who I was, and at that young age, I couldn't understand why or what I might do about it. Let me be clear, though: I never doubted that my mother loved me. She just didn't seem to like me very much.

Years later, as a new parent, I still carried around an indignant rage for how I felt she had treated me. With this longstanding tension simmering just below the surface, I was a worn out mother of a demanding seven-month-old baby who ended every exhausting day with a forty-five-minute rage before falling off to sleep.

One night, when Mom was visiting, she experienced firsthand this intense nighttime ritual. After Jordan had finally fallen asleep, we peeked into his crib. As we watched him contentedly suck his thumb, Mom smiled and whispered, "Look at him. What a sweet angel he is when he's sleeping," repeating that classic refrain of parents on their last nerve, when, at last, their child blessedly sleeps and their hearts soften.

Her comment cut me like a knife. Instead of feeling grateful that she could give my son the loving acceptance that she hadn't been able to give me, she triggered something massive in me, and I shut down. With an uncharacteristic blank stare on my face, I hissed, "No, I don't see that. Not even when he's sleeping."

Something had changed, and Mom later told me that my vacant eyes alarmed her. She blurted out, "But, Nancy, he's just like you!"

Sharp inhale.

"What?" In that millisecond, I experienced a moment of grace, a profound knowing with mind, body, and heart that changed my life, my mom's life, and the lives of my children.

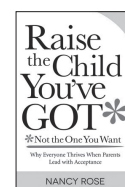
Instantly, in seeing Jordan as being in my shoes for the very first time, I had the answer to the question that had been plaguing me all my life: what had I done to be treated this way? I hadn't done anything. I was just too much for her to handle. I had been feeling overwhelmed by Jordan, and now understood that my own mother had felt the same toward me.

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Did that mean Jordan would feel as I had? Would he follow in his mother's footsteps and ask himself what was wrong with him? In that moment, the idea that he could feel the kind of pain that I had felt, because of something I did, was abhorrent to me, and powerful enough to create an instant commitment to do everything in my power to prevent that from happening.

The enormity of these revelations jolted me right out of my self-righteously indignant childhood story about "the way she treated me." By stepping out of that story, I opened the door to feel compassion for my mother and what she had gone through in raising me. I could now see with sickening clarity how easy it would have been to unconsciously go down the same path as hers. Like an emergency defibrillator, these truths shocked my heart into unconditional acceptance for my feisty, determined, ferocious, and precious little boy. In that moment, I vowed I would understand and accept Jordan as he was and never make him feel wrong for being himself.

Twenty-six years later, I value my decision to accept Jordan's disposition, his outlook on life, and his personality one hundred percent. I had to look at it like this: Jordan was born with a feisty, strong-willed temperament. He can't help his strong feelings, and it's not his fault that he's not easygoing. Allowing him to be who he is was the first step in raising him to become the best version of himself.



Excerpted from *Raise the Child You've Got - Not the One You Want*, by Nancy Rose. Calling herself "The Acceptance Advocate," Nancy offers presentations and workshops, and writes about the fundamental need of children to be accepted as they are, and her new model of parenting called *Leading with Acceptance*. nancyrose.com

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