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"Give me a place to stand and I will take you somewhere else."

Erma Bombeck – No Kidding

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I've been surprised by the response I've gotten when I've told people that I portray Erma Bombeck. Simply *naming* Erma generates spontaneous laughter. I'm not talking about a smile of recognition. No, people actually burst out laughing. They may not remember specific columns she wrote, but mere *mention* of the name Erma Bombeck triggers vivid memories of the *feelings* they had reading her column or her books, how her wit, humor, and acknowledgement saved them, turning frustration and despair into comic relief and self-acceptance as she described the multitude of trials and tribulations inherent in marriage, child bearing, potty training, teenage negotiating, and empty nesting, along with the shopping, housekeeping, doctor's visits, and a thousand other insistent aspects of everyday life.

I have a theory why her effect is so enduring. There is a secret ingredient in her body of work that is there for all to see. It simmers in the soup to keep it from tasting only sarcastic and cutting. It is the herb that gives her writing heart. It is this: Just often enough, she reminds us of the love that underlies all of the anxieties, frustrations, fears, and hair-tearing moments of being a parent.

Sometimes Erma fools us with a pull-the-rug-out-from-under-you finish, as in her "Mike and the Grass"¹ article. We laugh as we watch the father, who feels compelled to live up to the suburban ideal of having a beautiful lawn, bemoan assault after assault on his grass by his son Mike, who at various stages of growing up wants in the yard a sandbox, a jungle gym, an inflatable swimming pool, a campground for his Boy Scout troop, a basketball court, each of which wreaks havoc on the tender shoots. At each round, Mom reassures Dad, "It will come back." Until the day finally comes: Dad looks out across a flawless sward and asks with a catch in his voice, "He will come back, won't he?"

Occasionally she set aside the humor (mostly) to honor people who go unappreciated: The mother who has a disabled child²; The stepfather who has taken the role of "relief pitcher" and must every day summon the optimism to bring home a win³; The mother who has lost a child to miscarriage, accident, violence, disease or drugs⁴.

Once in a while Erma waded into social commentary: contrasting the farce of scary movies with the horror of the six o'clock news; expressing dismay at Christmas traditions succumbing to convenience; or composing a tribute to Edith Bunker and all the other "givers" in this world who listen to you openly and completely, rather than being preoccupied with thinking up a story they want to tell you in return.⁵

Erma Bombeck called herself a terrible cook. But she got the recipe right for life. Conjecturing what it might be like some unknown day in the future to be interrogated by "a

¹ May 1973

² May 1980

³ Jan 1980

⁴ May 1995

⁵ Examples from *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression*

higher court” she imagined being asked, “So, empty your pockets. What have you got left of your life? Any dreams that were unfulfilled? Any unused talent that we gave you when you were born that you still have left? Any unsaid compliments or bits of love that you haven’t spread around?” And she planned to be able to answer, “I’ve nothing to return. I spent everything you gave me. I’m as naked as the day I was born.”⁶

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⁶ March 1987