

30th Anniversary Benefit Luncheon Anna Quindlen: Insights on Parenting

BY PAMELA AWAD

Having chronicled “Life in the Thirties,” Anna Quindlen tackled the issue of parenting in the millennium, after a fashion, before an audience gathered to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of Parents in Action. Speaking extemporaneously to the almost three hundred assembled guests at the University Club on Wednesday October 21st, Ms. Quindlen reflected on feminism and motherhood, our changing expectations of the world, and our children, a generational force on the edge of adulthood.

Barely taller than the podium, Ms. Quindlen, mother to three children in their early twenties, told many truths with a mix of humor and insight. The audience responded with laughter when she described the difficulty of trying to keep up with the Joneses, or in this case their children, whose mothers, “by the way, all lied. OK, I no longer believe in nine month olds who speak in full sentences.”

More poignantly, she ruminated on how “in the face of the enormous feminist revolution that has really transformed America during our lifetime we have experienced the phenomenon of manic motherhood.” A smile flickered across her face as she described Uber-mom’s exhaustion at the end of the day, “her life somewhere between the stations of the cross and a decathlon.” Motherhood became “professionalized,” she noted, and the quest for perfection resulted in frustration, a nagging fear of failure and a noticeable lack of humor. It’s hard “Being Perfect” (Random

Anna Quindlen is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and bestselling author. She has written novels, non-fiction books and two children’s books. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her nationally syndicated New York Times column, “Public and Private” and currently writes a column entitled, “The Last Word” every other week in Newsweek.

House 2005), particularly when many members of the opposite sex are perfectly happy “being adequate.”

What is the impact of this on our children? Well, both parent and child seem to be engaged in a quest for “a moment’s peace.” Ms. Quindlen and her family decided to forgo competitive sports on the weekends since their hearts weren’t really in it. She quipped, “in my religion, martyrs die.”

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And, according to Ms. Quindlen, perhaps the greatest generation is yet to be. Our children may have inherited a world vastly different from the one we did, but their expectations are different too. They are a savvy group, perhaps more aware than we that our “priorities need to be recalibrated and that ‘stuff’ is not salvation.” “Doing better” than the previous generation may in fact mean just that. By truly embracing ethnic and racial parity, gender equality and a genuine partnership between men and women, this group may become “the first generation in which young women no longer agonize over how to balance work and family, and young men stop thinking they will balance work and family by getting married.” It is possible our children will “assess themselves not in terms of their income but in terms of their spirit.”

This generation, which Ms. Quindlen describes as more tolerant, creative, relaxed and community service minded than their parents, might also be the most qualified to create the “next big thing.” Having long been bombarded with mixed messages, they may have figured out what really matters. They have avoided the pitfalls and may realize the promise of the women’s movement by avoiding stereotypes of masculinity and traditional femininity. “If the stiletto heel is an instrument of torture, and it is, a tie is nothing more

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than a noose with a nice pattern,” she noted. Breaking with tradition may better allow our children the “courage to be themselves.” Ms. Quindlen makes the case that feminism has grown up along with our children, recognizing that “men are not the enemy,” and that boys and girls are equally valuable and vulnerable.

Although Ms. Quindlen spoke on behalf of Parents in Action, not mothers in action, a mother’s impact cannot be underestimated. And it is mothers who need to be forgiven their transgressions, which may include strongly encouraging the 4th grader to rewrite a paper using 8th grade vocabulary; or unwittingly transferring parental anxieties about SATs, college applications or even art projects to their children. We need to avoid “turning ‘motherdom’ into a series of annoying tasks and making it martyrdom.” Children will be who they are.

Ms. Quindlen ended on a most eloquent note. “My most incandescent memories of my own childhood are of making my mother laugh. My kids did the same for me. I hope and I pray that the good times are what they remember.”

Nobody says it better. ●

To read Anna Quindlen’s speech in its entirety, please go to our Web site: www.parentsinaction.org