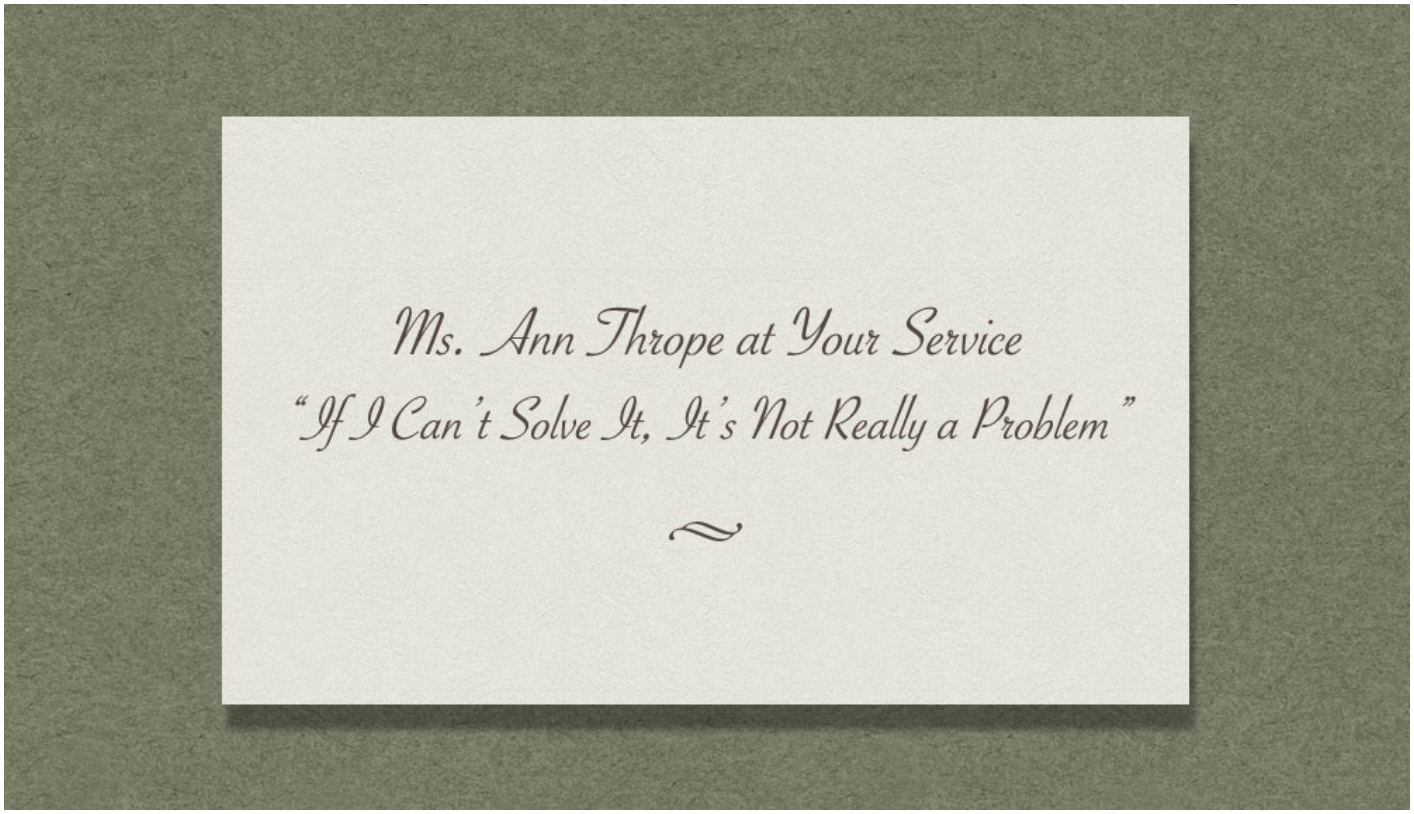
Misdirection [1]

February 9, 2015 Advice [2]
Family Stories [3]

Two Advice Columns by Ruth Carmel

Winner of the 2014 Talking Writing Prize for Advice Writing



Column 1: In-laws, Outlaws

Dear Ann:

My husband (I'll call him Mike) likes to have family gatherings at our house. The trouble is, he's uneasy the whole time, and his mood casts a pall over the group. There is always something in the air. It's clear to me there are unresolved issues between him and his parents, but Mike doesn't want to talk about it, and I don't think it's my place to ask my in-laws. I think they are lovely, and I want to help. What do I do about the elephant in the room?

Signed, Helpless

***Dear Helpless*:**

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What do you do? Try dropping the clichés. The only way to solve your problem is to address it unflinchingly; the banalities you offer reflect your unsuccessful attempts to hide your discomfort. Don't get overdramatic. There's no pall; your husband's just unhappy. There's nothing in the air except your collective laziness. No elephant, dear; you're all simply unwilling to act like adults and confront your feelings. Until you all grow up and start talking honestly about what's bothering everyone, I can't help you.

Dear Ann:

I received your answer, and I must apologize. Apparently, I failed to be clear. There is not, literally, a pall, as you quite correctly said. But there is, in fact, an elephant in the room. My husband's mother spent some time in India as a young woman—her father worked in a local wildlife sanctuary—and she fell into a rather unconventional romance. My father-in-law is a true gentleman; he reminds me of Babar. Mike was adopted as a baby. The trouble is that my father-in-law, bless him—his name is Raju, but he likes the family to call him Packy—oh, you're right, of course. It's so hard to say, and yes, I have been hiding behind platitudes.

The blunt truth is that, not surprisingly, he smells like an elephant—that's the something always in the air—and occasionally he relieves himself on the carpet. It's to be expected, but Mike just doesn't know what to do. He wants his parents to be a part of our lives, and we love to see them, but the stench is terrible. Not to mention having to replace the carpet every time.

Really, if you had any suggestions at all, I would be grateful.

Signed, Helpless

***Dear Helpless*:**

Meet at the zoo. Or the circus. Good luck.

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Column 2: Writing About Your Kids—for Real

It’s controversial to write about your family. I’ve even tackled the thorny issue myself, for this very publication. I've come up with justifications—you might even say reasons—that writing about your children is fine: It helps the writer see difficult issues more objectively and, thereby, make sense of them.

But the truth is, we all know why it’s acceptable, even good, to write about your kids: They take and take and take, and they may as well give back. Writing about them is a painless way for them to do it.

The best part is they won’t even know they’re giving back. It’s not like you’re saying, *Hey, grandma’s been pretty generous over the last few years, how about kicking in for the rent?* Not that there’s anything wrong with that—and not that you would have to say it, anyway. If your tots are young enough, they’re not aware they have bank accounts or any assets at all. They probably don’t even know what an asset is. But why trouble their tiny heads? After all, you aren’t taking back anything they really need. You give all that stuff to them, and you still will. Food? Check. Clothing? Naturally. Shelter? Well, they live with you, don’t they?

This is just a nice way of letting them repay you for all you’ve given them without their actually paying you. You’re just converting their experiences into cash. Would they have had those experiences if you hadn’t brought them into this

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world? Certainly not. And have they contributed to their upkeep? Unlikely. So here's their chance. They'll thank you for it, one day, when they find out. Definitely. And having kids is expensive. Don't bother adding up just the cost of eighteen, nineteen, twenty years of school. It will only make you question your life choices.

You might tell me that kids give back to you in love, in your emotional growth. That's true. They do. That's my point. Where does it say you can't monetize those moments of parental joy and heartbreak?

Because sometimes there's more heartbreak than joy. They don't tell you that in Lamaze class, or whatever you sign up for to convince yourself you're prepared to have a child—not just give birth to one, but *have a child*, forever. All you'll hear from everyone who's done it is that being a parent will be the signal event of your life. Listen carefully, though. When they talk, does the word "happy" ever come up? If it does, you won't hear it again until every single birthday song (which is just another hit to your wallet).

Let's say you do everything right. Your child delights you: does what a baby should do, then what a toddler should do, then talks and goes to school and first learns and then learns how to learn, which is the thing that makes your heart leap. And at eighteen or so, your child goes off to college. And every cent you've paid from the moment the cashier swiped your Visa for Lamaze is worth it, every one.

But what if you don't do everything right? I'm assuming you meant to do it right; we all mean to do it right. But what if you get it wrong, and you find out you got it wrong when your child doesn't do what a baby should do? Or he does, but then doesn't do what a toddler should do? Or he does, but then doesn't do the rest, not all of it, not enough of it? Somewhere along the way, earlier or later, that child whom you somehow, unbelievably made is flawed. Maybe only slightly, like a diamond that will never be as valuable as it looks, except to you. Or maybe very flawed, obviously flawed, so you find value that no one could find; you find it because if you didn't, yours would have been a wasted life. And maybe your child is somewhere in between, so you spend your days ricocheting between hope and despair. What then?

Then you write. You make a little money off your kid. No harm done.

Art Information

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"Ms. Ann Thrope" is the nom de plume of Ruth Carmel—which is also a nom de plume. Ruth is a lawyer and writer who lives in New York with her husband and children. Her essay "Why I Write About My Family" [5] appeared in the Spring 2014 issue of *Talking Writing*. There, she makes clear why she's using a pseudonym.

Source URL: https://mail.talkingwriting.com/misdirection

Links:
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[2] https://mail.talkingwriting.com/tw-issue-themes/writing-advice
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[5] http://talkingwriting.com/why-i-write-about-my-family

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