

Nancy Vogl, a native of Michigan, is a writer, speaker, entrepreneur, single mother of three daughters (adding a fourth daughter to her brood a few years ago) and the coauthor of *Chicken Soup for the Single Parent's Soul*. Along with her daughter, Heidi, also a single mother, she is also the author of the upcoming illustrated children's book, *Am I a Color Too?* It's poignant, yet simple, message on diversity from a child's point of view is already garnering great praise.

Chicken Soup for the Single Parent's Soul can be purchased at your favorite bookstore, or for a personalized, autographed copy go to <http://www.nancyvogl.com>. Or consider having Nancy present at one of your upcoming PWP meetings where she can autograph books.

Single Parents are Not Alone by Nancy Vogl

Back when I was a newly-anointed single mom, and living in an affluent university town (we were the sole "renters" in the area), I often felt like a walking billboard that shouted, "Hey, look at me! Loser." I was the only single mother in the neighborhood. The scarlet-letter mentality seemed alive and well twenty years ago and it was pretty lonely raising my three daughters alone in an area filled with successful doctors, lawyers, businesspeople, professors, their spouses, and their finely-attired offspring.

Many times my children would lament over not having a "normal" family, and I would go overboard trying to make up for their lot in life with what little I could financially muster up. I was a commission-based, self-employed salesperson, working part-time so I could spend as much time as possible with my babies, and the meager child support checks were always behind. Guilt was an emotion I struggled with often no matter how much I tried to make things better for my three girls.

Nowadays, society's attitude towards single parenting has changed greatly and parents going solo is so much more widely accepted that single parents shouldn't feel the need to bury their heads. Whether a single parent because of divorce, widowhood, by choice or surprise, single moms and dads can walk proudly knowing their role as parents is a crucial and honorable one.

With nearly one-third of all American households being single-parent families, tens of millions of people are affected by single parenting and the numbers are growing, especially with single-parent fathers. Roughly one-fourth of all single-parent families are now headed up by a single dad. At some point, society will no longer be able to refer to the two-parent family as "traditional."

As lone parents we are a special breed who must find an uncommon strength and tenacity to survive and thrive for the sake of our children - and ourselves. It isn't easy, but we have no choice! There are bills to pay, children to care for, obligations to meet,

work schedules and double the household responsibilities. The daily tasks sometimes seem endless, with little time left over for ourselves.

Yet, there is a level of pride we surely feel because of our role as single parents, perhaps achieving things we might not have attempted were we in a "traditional family." Maybe you've gone back for that diploma, taken your children on a cross-country trip, or opened up your own business. Or perhaps just balancing the checkbook by yourself, tackling that leaky sink, or dealing with the holidays alone was a monumental triumph.

Even with all of our accomplishments, as single parents we often feel very alone, overwhelmed and our days may be fraught with stress and anxiety. After raising three beautiful girls to young adulthood, and somehow making it, here are a few tidbits of wisdom I've gleaned from my years as a single mom:

Forgiveness is essential. When I divorced my husband in the mid-80's, I was clinging to so much anger over his turbulent ways and how he treated me that I used up valuable energy that should have been reserved to care for my children and myself. Not until I heard professional speaker Michael Wickett share the age-old adage, "Forgiveness is a gift you give yourself" did it occur to me that all the rage I was harboring was not hurting my ex, but was having a tremendously negative affect on me and my girls. While I couldn't change the past, I could change the present, and life didn't begin to expand in a positive way for me until I forgave. It wasn't easy, and it is still a daily process, but once I learned to forgive, and keep on forgiving, my world began to open up. And forgiving myself was also part of the journey. Author Cherie Carter-Scott says, "Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were."

Guilt is a useless emotion. No matter what we do or how hard we try, many of us wrestle with the guilt that we aren't doing enough, or WE aren't enough. Get over it! You are doing the very best you can in this moment in time with what you know, where and who you are. If you love your children, take care of them to the very best of your abilities and resources, it is enough. It doesn't mean that there isn't room for growth and positive change, but lose the need to feel guilty.

Find the blessings. When I was a young single mom, there were three things I coveted: milk in the refrigerator, a full tank of gas, and toilet paper. With milk I figured we could at least have cereal or pancakes; with gasoline I could get my children to their various activities; and with toilet paper...need I say more? To this day, when I open my refrigerator and see a gallon of milk, stop at a gas station, or change the role of paper in the bathroom, I still breath a sigh of relief.

Gratitude is such a powerful force! Cherishing the little things can open up a whole new way of living. It isn't always easy, but so worth focusing on. On one particularly lonely Saturday night after putting the girls to bed, rather than bemoan my plight, I sat

down and listed some of my favorite things such as: daffodils, soft sweaters, expressive eyes, dimples, books, romantic comedies, walks on the beach, spontaneous hugs from my daughters. It was a freeing exercise and brought me into a joyous focus.

My friend, writer and literary agent Wendy Keller lost her first two children in a tragic automobile accident. After having a third baby a few years later and subsequently becoming a single mom, she learned the hard way how precious and fleeting life can be and now treasures the small moments her Sophia Rose provides her...like her delight in butterflies, puppies and new boxes of crayons. What little blessings can you find in your everyday life?

Laughter is cleansing. I can't think of anything more potent for dealing with everyday challenges than finding the humor, in even seemingly bad things. In my new book, "Chicken Soup for the Single Parent's Soul," contributing writer Barbara Stanley tells of one monumental occasion when all on the same day she was fired, the car broke down, her babysitter quit and she was evicted from her home. The day was so filled with a series of calamities that crying was no longer a solution and laughing at the sheer absurdity of the day was her last resort. The laughter brought an epiphany that nothing else could go wrong, and that things would just have to begin to go right. As the noted spiritual leader Jean Houston says, "At the height of laughter, the universe is flung into a kaleidoscope of new possibilities."

No one makes it alone. In the midst of my long, drawn-out divorce, with the fresh wounds of a broken marriage stinging quite loudly, I had no assets to speak of, very little income, no credit history of my own, was low on self-esteem, and with child support checks coming sporadically every few weeks or months, I could barely provide for food and other basics. On top of that, much like the breakdown of my troubled marriage, our little television decided it, too, was going to die...not a good thing when the antics of Big Bird and the Cookie Monster entertained and enlightened my girls and afforded some relief to a weary mommy.

Marching myself into the local bank with three little girls in tow, I practically sat on the loan officer's desk pleading for a loan to purchase a new TV. Though my spirit had been crushed from the failures of my marriage, somehow the loan officer saw a spark of promise in me, even though I could barely see it for myself.

With a twinkle in his eye, and requesting a signature or two, he gave me my very first bank loan...a thousand dollars! It was a moment of deep satisfaction, proof that maybe I could wrangle my way into the real world and survive.

It's funny where inspiration and hope can come from. Sometimes simply an encouraging word or a friendly smile, or an act of faith such as a small loan to a frazzled mom is all it takes.

As single parents, you've got to trust that there are more people out there than not that will help you, believe in you, support you, guide you. Twenty years ago I felt very alone and, yet I may have isolated myself thinking I wouldn't be accepted by others. Years later, it took the memory of that bank loan to help me realize that I did have people I could have reached out to, perhaps seeking out another single mom to connect with, or extending a friendship to one of my married neighbors. I now know not that I'm not alone and neither are you. You're only alone if you choose to be.