

MY MOTHER ALWAYS LOVED ME BEST
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
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Erma Bombeck wrote about God's creation of mothers. She declared that when the good Lord was creating Mothers, he was into his sixth day of overtime when an angel appeared and said, "You're putting an awful lot of work into this one."

The Lord said, "Have you read the specs on this order? She has to be completely washable, but not plastic; have 180 removable parts, all of them replaceable. She has to run on black coffee and leftovers; have a lap that disappears when she stands up; and have a kiss that can cure anything from a broken leg to a broken heart."

"Six pairs of hands?" asked the angel. "No way!"

"Oh, it's not the hands that are causing me the problem," said the Lord. "It's the three pairs of eyes that Mothers have to have."

"That's on the standard model?" questioned the angel.

The Lord nodded. "One pair that sees through closed doors when she asks, "What are you kids doing in there?" when she already knows. Another in the back of her head that sees what she shouldn't, but what she has to know. And of course, the ones here in the front so

she can look at a child when he goofs up and says, 'I understand and I love you,' without uttering a word."

"Lord," said the angel, touching his sleeve gently, "come to bed, finish this tomorrow."

"I can't," said the Lord. "I am so close to creating something very much like myself. Already I have one who heals herself when she is sick; can feed a family of six on a pound of hamburger, and can get a nine year old boy to stand under a shower."

The angel circled the model very slowly. "It's so soft," she sighed.

"But tough," said the Lord excitedly. "You cannot imagine what a mother can do or endure."

"Can it think?" wondered the angel aloud.

"Not only think, but it can reason and compromise," replied the Creator.

The angel bent over and ran her fingers across the cheek. "Why there's a leak," said the angel. "I told you that you are trying to put too much into this model."

"Oh, that's not a leak," responded the Lord. "It's a tear."

"Why, what's it for?" the angel insisted.

God said, “It’s for joy, sadness, disappointment, pain, loneliness, and fright.”

“Oh, you are a genius,” clapped the angel.

The Creator looked very solemn and said, “But I didn’t put it there.”¹

My mother has been all of these things to me and more. In fact, I can even go so far as to say that my mother loved me best! I am not suggesting that she loved me more than my sister or brother. I am saying that she understood me, and she respected my personality more than anyone else. She loved me so much that she nurtured and fed my imagination, my interests, and my skills. My mother appreciated my mind and did not try to mold me into someone I was not. Shame was never a part of my mother’s attitude or actions toward me. My general failure at mathematics was never a personal crusade for her, but she supplemented and encouraged my love for books, nature, history, and ideas.

Before I entered grade school my mother and I used to catch the trolley and journey to the St. Petersburg Public Library, which is downtown on Mirror Lake. Reminiscent of Greek architecture, the library became a “branch” of a larger system. I do not like the larger

¹ Erma Bombeck – source not known.

system. It is very modern, spacious, and loud. Students gather there for intimacy and community, not knowledge.

The only voices ever heard at the library on Mirror Lake were of women who read stories on Saturday morning. Of course, I also heard in my mind the voices of the *Swiss Family Robinson*, the braying of *Bowser the Hound*, and the drawl of *Uncle Remus*. My world and my imagination fused into the stories of Charles Dickens as I entered adolescence, where I fell in love with Little Dorrit and Emily of *Great Expectations*. In high school I began reading Dostoyevsky, Camus, and American novelists such as Herman Melville, Leon Uris, and James Michener. I still have the copy of Thoreau's *Walden* that I bought at the high school book fair. Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg were the major poets that I read in those years. Southern writers played a significant role in my education and hold profound influence in my heart and soul today. These would include Mark Twain, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Langston Hughes, Walker Percy, and most especially William Faulkner. More contemporary Southern writers that I have read and been influenced by are Wendell Berry, Maya Angelou, and the historian Shelby Foote.

During all of this time my mother fed my love for reading. My father often traveled on weekends. On Saturdays my mother and I would go downtown to Haslem's bookstore. Haslem's now takes up an entire city block. Those were the days when paperback books cost anywhere from fifty cents to a dollar and a half. You could buy *War and Peace* for about three dollars. My mother and I would buy a grocery bag full of paperback books in the morning. We would then spend the rest of the weekend reading. The only time we spoke was at meal times, which were very simple. We didn't want to waste good reading time cooking and washing dishes. On one of these junkets I purchased Bertrand Russell's slender volume, *Skeptical Essays*, and very much enjoyed his wit and English humor. My mother later gave me his *Autobiography*, which I still cherish to this day. She never censored my reading and taught me to be open to ideas. Tolerance for different points of view was not universal throughout my family, especially on questions of religion. My fundamentalist uncle was certain the Bertrand Russell was the anti-Christ.

I am sure that all of this has made a contribution to my being a progressive Christian, though I doubt my mother had such intentions. Bertrand Russell influenced my willingness to question religious

ideas though I soon grew to understand that the god he rebelled against was the 19th Century English Victorian deity that any human would rightly deny in the 21st century.

The major point here is not simply a love of books. My mother's gift was to understand me, and the role that ideas would play in my life. She fed the gifts of my mind and imagination and did not worry about the aptitudes that I would never acquire. My dad is one of the most mechanically gifted men I know. My son, Christopher, is the same way. They can look at things and be able to figure out how they work and how to fix them. I don't even bother to kick the tires or look under the hood when I buy a car. I have no idea what I am looking at. I do not try to fix things I know perfectly well are beyond my ability. My mother taught me that my identity as a person and as a male did not depend on stereotypes. She respected my gifts and launched me in their direction.

I once heard an interview on National Public Radio with Carroll Spinney. He is the voice of Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch on Sesame Street. He wrote a book, *The Wisdom of Big Bird/the Dark Genius of Oscar the Grouch*. At a very young age Spinney fell in love with puppets. His mother made his first puppet, a snake. Spinney

offered a puppet show to his family and friends, charging two cents admission. Sixteen people came to see his show, and when it was over, the audience applauded. His mother was from England and knew the Punch and Judy tradition of puppeteering. She researched the subject deeply and made Carroll the Punch, Judy, and baby puppets. She would eventually make over 70 puppets for her son. Spinney commented that his life and his career were deeply indebted to her respect for her son's talent. My mother loved me best because she honored my skills, interests, and talents.

My mother was one of the most gregarious people you would ever meet. She could be at Disney World by 10:00 in the morning. By eight o'clock that night she would have met every visitor in the park and has told them about her acquaintances in their hometown. Like all of the people in my family she had a great sense of humor. She taught us to laugh the most about ourselves but never at other people. Mother liked a good story, but you were not allowed to use the "f" word in our house. Consequently you would hear the word "fire truck" in stories that were often told. One of her favorite stories was about the time we were camping in North Carolina. We had been hiking all day and did not return to our campsite until dark. She and

Dad had gone up to the comfort station to use the restroom. My dad had not seen the “Wet Paint” sign on the toilet seat. When all was said and done, he had a perfectly painted white horseshoe on his fanny. My mom spent the next several hours at the picnic table under a dimly lit lantern cleaning him off with white gasoline. The work could have been done in about half the time, if only she could have stopped laughing.

I am an introvert and my mother was an extrovert. My sense of humor is much drier. But I do not know where I would be without a sense of humor, and without the ability to step out of myself from time to time and have a good laugh. My mother taught me the relationship between humor and human dignity. This is especially true as she aged. My parents and grandparents knew their share of grief and pain over the years of their lives, but they managed it with humorous grace. I once was complaining about a list of ailments when my mother said wryly, “Well you know, Gary, getting old isn’t for wimps.” A sense of humor has proven not only an important tool for survival, but also an indispensable tool for the work of ministry. I have a friend I have recently reconnected with. He is Steve Winter, a United Methodist minister that I went to seminary with and worked

with in a psychiatric hospital. I talk with Steve every few weeks and it is one of the most therapeutic conversations I have. Our conversation is mostly humor and laughter. I love Steve for that.

One of the fondest memories of my mother is that of her singing. Whenever she worked, especially at the vacuum cleaner, she sang. She loved to sing the tunes of musicals such as *South Pacific*, *Oklahoma*, *Gigi*, *Camelot*, and *Porgy and Bess*. She sang some of Judy Garland's songs especially well. I can still hear her singing "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" in my heart's memory. I do not share her appreciation for musicals, but I do share her love of song and the human voice. And since that is the only instrument I play, it has brought me many hours of happiness. I love to sing in church, but also on the lawn tractor, or in the car on long distance drives.

I could name a myriad of things my mother did for me throughout my life. She was president of the PTA and chaired the school carnival several times. She served time as a den mother and helped me earn various Boy Scout merit badges. Mom taught me to cook and drove me to various activities that ranged from first aid classes to the Methodist Youth Fellowship. Those, of course, were different times and the roles of women were often locked on to the

work of raising children. I can never fully appreciate the hours of her time that might have been given to her own career or interests. I cannot speak for her to answer impossible questions as to whether it was worth it. I only know that I cannot measure the worth to me, for the best that is in me bears her imprint. She loved me for who I am and that is the best love that any mother can give her child.

Each of you could write a tribute to your mother. My mother was not perfect, but as I said, she loved me best. There are many qualities of motherhood and I was very fortunate to be blessed with the ones that proved to be essential to my life. I know that some people are not so fortunate. And to that extent, this sermon may not have touched you. That must surely be painful. And, I wish that you could have met my mom, for she would have loved you for who you are too.

My mother gave me many wonderful qualities. I know there are other mothers who share different but equally important qualities with their children. And I want to affirm this morning that such qualities do not depend on marital status, sexual orientation, or career. The qualities that my mother brought to me had nothing to do with whether she was heterosexual or homosexual, married or

“single head of household,” employed inside or outside the home. In fact, I bet those questions never entered your mind until this moment. To a child, they are not the most important questions either. The fact is that family configurations have changed remarkably during my lifetime. We never knew the term “blended family” when I was a kid. Blended families represent many of the families I am in relationship with, including my own. No, the most important thing that every mother ponders is how to love each child best.

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