

Mom

19 Aug, 2020

I suppose most folks could wax eloquent about their love for their mothers. I'm no different. Mom was someone I wish each and all of you could have met. She would have welcomed you as a friend. She was loving and kind and gracious and full of empathy. She was also one of the smartest people I've ever met. And I've known a lot of smart people in my time. I married one, and together we raised two more.

I've known college presidents and professors and brilliant colleagues. Most of them were well educated, and I don't begrudge them their time at college or university, but we didn't all go that route. In many cases and for assorted reasons, folks didn't go that route. Some couldn't.

Mom was prevented from getting the university education many folks take for granted. By dint of hard work and a fine mind, she earned a full ride scholarship to UCLA. But this was in the 1940s and her father – an (expletive deleted) if ever one was – prevented her taking advantage of this incredible opportunity she so richly deserved. In those days, your father's 'no' was final. And ole Vernon didn't believe women belonged in academia.

I imagine Mom was crushed but she wasn't destroyed. She just kept reading. And learning. And she helped her five children learn. Made us love books by the simple expedient of so obviously loving them herself. We didn't have a public library at first in our unincorporated corner of the world, but Mom never missed knowing when the Bookmobile would be within striking distance. And when a branch library opened close enough to us, it became a regular pilgrimage site for Marion and her kids.

She introduced me to the idea of the encyclopedia as recreational reading. Taught me to apply all the little 'more information' stickers that came with each year's update volume so that we would know where to go to get the latest information.

But she also taught us that learning was not to be had solely from printed sources. Learning was all around us. It was okay to bring home frogs and snakes because she actually found them interesting. She encouraged us to explore and seek and question. And she could always be counted on for a thoughtful answer, treating a questioner of any age as a worthy learner. Or co-learner, if she didn't know the answer, which she would readily admit before joining with you in seeking more knowledge.

Oh, sure - she did all the 'mom' things that were expected of her in those days. Hers is still the best potato salad I've ever tasted. And as I've said in earlier missives, she didn't just celebrate Christmas, she waged Christmas. Her hand made clothes were second to none and to this day, the sound of a sewing machine makes me well up. I take none of these things for granted; it was hard work to keep five kids and husband clothed, fed, nurtured. It's just that while I knew and loved her in that narrow context as my Mom, I truly regret that I never put more effort into finding out about her other lives, her personal ways of being and of knowing.

It was only after I belatedly earned my own college degree, living up to a promise she'd extracted from me years earlier, that I first heard and then verified through my aunts the story of her being denied a university education. By the time I heard that story, all five of Marion's children had earned their degrees and several graduate degrees to boot. Her grandkids became learners and teachers and her legacy is one of educated progeny meeting life's challenges head on.

Mom wanted the best for everyone. She would hate to see anyone denied a fair chance at life. She would want everyone to be afforded their fair shot. She would always listen, even when she was herself silenced. Accordingly, she would have been horrified at much of what passes for political discourse these days. But she would have been thrilled to see streets painted with affirmations of core truths. She would have been proud of the folks wearing masks and staying home for the sake of others. And she would have been utterly thrilled that of the many voices being raised – and finally, heard - today, so many of them resound in treble clef.

Mary and I used to recite a mantra to our children that went, 'If you want to have a friend, be a friend.' I truly wish each and all of you could have known my mother. I wish you could have spent an evening at the kitchen table with her discussing Herriot's 'vet' books or the latest musical comedy or just the events of your day. In her, you would have found a friend.

I hope each and all of you, especially during this time of physical distancing, are able to feel engaged and valued and loved. Because that's what Marion McDermott would have wanted for you. And we could do worse than to follow her lead.