

Marion, twenty years later

3 April, 2021

“20” seems to be a big number in my life this week. Yesterday, I hit the twenty-year mark with my current (and we hope and plan, final) employer. It’s been a hell of a ride, not always wonderful but my toils for them serve a mission that is close to my heart and I get to work with some truly wonderful folks. So, twenty years, woo-hoo and the plan is to not make it to twenty-one.

I’ve another – and more personally significant – reason to cast my gaze back two decades. Two days before I started this job, we buried my mother, Marion. And it’s to her and her effect on my life that I turn my gaze. I’m far enough past the initial gout of stupefied mourning (she’s really gone? I mean, I knew this would happen, but...) to be able to think about her without being overwhelmed by grief. Even so, to this day I occasionally find myself starting to pick up the phone before coming up short as I realize there’s no ‘Mom’ at the other end.

I suppose I’m not alone in thinking of my mother as the most perfect mom ever to walk the earth. Let’s face it – mothers have an advantage over all other humans, dads included, in terms of how we came into the world, how we were initially nurtured and guided. Children of the where/when in which I grew up spent more of their first few years in the presence of their mater than with all other people combined. So, our view of the world is in large part formed, at least foundationally, by our mothers.

In my case, that simple fact did more to help me become (eventually) a useful contributor to society and a reasonably happy person than all other circumstances of my life taken together. My mother was a role model to define the term.

Marion Kersting was a great student with a fine mind. So much so that after high school she earned a full ride scholarship to (UCLA? USC?), and most likely would have enjoyed a very different life trajectory had her father not been a certifiable a-hole who didn’t believe college was for girls. I could go on about Vernon’s failings as a human being; suffice to say that much of his input to his daughters’ lives was more in the nature of something to be overcome than to build on. And overcome, Marion did.

She was a young wife with two tiny daughters when I was born and this played out in the context of her struggles with poliomyelitis, which left her partially paralyzed for life. I was fostered for my first few months by another family while Mom learned to navigate her new normal but pretty soon, my parents took me back and my education began. We never knew Mom as a formally educated person with strings of degrees. She wasn’t. But she was one of the great self-educators and she passed that trait to her children by example.

When I think of Marion McDermott in those days, I see her doing the fifties-era homemaker things like cooking and laundry, of course. I grew up, after all, in the Wonder years. But more than that, I see her doing the things she loved. Like sewing and particularly, designing and making doll clothes for my sisters. And the thing that most impressed my young mind was the time she spent reading.

Marion read deeply and widely and from those first mental awakenings I just naturally gravitated toward books as a source of information, entertainment, ideas. And to see reading as a sort of conversation in which the author offers their thoughts and the reader joins and responds in their own

time, at their own pace. And speaking of conversations, some of the best I ever enjoyed were the ones I had with my mom about the books we were reading.

Okay, so I really need to get to Saturday chores but I couldn't venture outside without getting this off my chest. Marion Catherine Kersting McDermott was a wonderful Mom and teacher and mentor that I wish you each and all could have met. And I'm thinking about her a lot this week.

Bottom line: Mom's been gone twenty years now and I'm still reading. Still, I hope, growing. And she's why.