

Why I love Mom

If my mother had been bad, through and through, if she had not been a checkerboard of goodness and badness, it would be easy. I could just hate her. But instead I have to hate her for the ways in which she hurt me, and love her for the ways in which she nurtured me. Loving and hating the same person is complicated, but realistic. Who can pretend that he has no dislike whatsoever for the many eccentricities and failings of his loved ones?

So what are the things that my mother did that made her irreplaceable? I remember a morning when I was about to go out the front door and walk to school. The lawns were frosty and the early morning sunlight had that extra-bright, pale look that means it's winter. I was bundled up, wearing mittens and a thick coat, and long pants under my dress. I stood in the open doorway, ready to dive into the frosty air, while my mother hugged me and made me laugh.

"I just love my little girl so much, I couldn't help myself, I just ate her all up. So when the teacher says, 'Where's Cynthia today?', I'll just have to confess and tell them the truth, I couldn't help myself, I loved her so much, I ate her all up!" "You can't tell my teacher that! You can't eat somebody up! Nobody does that!" I was giggling and protesting and wiggling inside her hug. As I recall, she was still in her bathrobe. I went out the door and she closed it behind me, smiling and waving. I miss that moment so bad it makes me cry every time I think about it.

Because it's gone. Not only because my mother has passed away; but because she lost the ability to love me, once she saw that I was growing up. My poor mother could only see abandonment in her future once her children's teen-aged years loomed. In her mind, children loved you more deeply and pleadingly than anyone, then suddenly changed when they entered adolescence.

And here was that awful inevitability, that there is no way around. Children grow up. Parents die. Things change. Suddenly, those changes were on her own horizon, along with their inevitable correlate, abandonment. She simply could not imagine that those who were no longer dependent on her for their survival could love her simply for herself and the irreplaceable memories they shared. She feared abandonment, and that fear followed her everywhere.

It made her angry, angry at those she had given her love to, but whom she saw as rejecting her. So my mom was the wonderfulest mom in the world, often, when I was seven years old, up until I was fourteen. Then she became suspicious of me, figuring that I was going to grow up and leave her, never to return, never to bring grandchildren back, or a son-in-law, or more love.

Her perception made her so lonely, I cry for what she went through. What was going on in her mind? Did she just sob in loneliness for her three estranged children? Did she try to avoid thinking about it, as an attempt to avoid the pain

that memories bring? Memories of children's hugs, of warm summer twilights with all four of us in our little family, my mother, my sister, my brother and myself, eating ice cream and bananas, sitting on my mom's bed and giggling with each other in the summer heat. Christmases and Thanksgiving dinners--all gone. My mother was not on speaking terms with us half the time, so all she had left were memories. If only I could have changed it! Waved a magic wand, freed everyone from blindness, so that they could look and see, beyond all the trivial irritants in life, how much we all loved each other, how blown into mist our inner lives would be if we lost even one of us.

And that is what happened: we lost one of us. We never even saw it coming. My brother's early death from an unsuspected brain tumor, my sister's death from colon cancer, my uncles' deaths as young men, unexpected and from misadventure, my cousins' deaths from the same plane crash that took my Uncle Morris. We lost so many of us. In this country, it's almost as if we have lost the ability to be family. My children have never even seen some of their cousins. They shrug about it. It makes me sad. The present is full of new roads to new places, but people are timid about getting to know relatives that they have never before met. They hang back, until they find out that they've wasted a relationship that was once possible, but no longer. People get old and die, and it's best to get to know your relatives while there is still that chance.

Here is one recurrent piece of my childhood past: I remember cold fall mornings, lying warm in bed, snuggled, half-awake, luxurious with the knowledge that I could stay there another half hour before it was time to get up. Outside it was foggy, and I could hear the ships blare their floating, ghostly, dense warnings at each other down in Elliot Bay, about two miles away from my house. The hollow blasts of sound were proof that the world was an orderly place, where important things were taken care of, like ships communicating with each other so that they didn't crash into each other. I could snooze on, safe, warm and innocent.

A world like this was so peaceful. I was uncomplicatedly happy. Just happy. And I was starting to hear some household sounds. My mother's early-morning sounds. The first thing she would do when it was time to get her children off to school, and to get herself ready for the day, was to put on her bathrobe and slippers and then grab her flashlight and a book of matches. She then went out into the hallway that all the bedrooms opened onto and turned on the oil, just a little, in the stove that was a secondary heating source for the upstairs. She would light a match and drop it down into the puddle of oil that sat in the bottom of the stove.

She would watch to see if the flame ignited the little puddle of oil, and if it did, then she could turn the oil up to regular drip and go off to the next of her chores, which was to start preparing breakfast for her three children. But sometimes the darn oil didn't ignite, and she would have to scrape a match across the box and drop another dribble of fire into the stove, hoping that it turned into a dribble of

flame at the bottom. Sometimes my poor mom had to light match after match before the oil caught fire.

She did not sigh with weariness, though weariness is much of what I imagine that she felt. She would swear under her breath, and when I heard that, I would listen extra carefully, hoping that after the next match dropped into the stove, I would hear my mom popping the lid back into place. I wonder today how many of the moms of my children's friends would hover over the stove in a stone-cold house in the early morning, just to heat things up so that it would be warm when their children dressed for school. Well, my mom did that.

And then there were the excursions to various apparel shops in downtown Seattle, searching for a dress for the 8th-grade graduation that was coming up. This graduation was an important event at the Seventh-Day Adventist school that I attended, because after the 8th grade, you could attend the Seventh-Day Adventist high-school academy, in Auburn. However, most of my classmates were going to do just what I was going to do--come back next fall to the same old school as a freshman. But the distinction between high-school and everything that came prior was still kind of an important one.

So my poor mom, after a full Friday's work at her self-built business, would go with me from store to store, looking at dresses. What was desired was a dress that looked as if there was a prom in mind, but a very demure one. Naturally, my mother and I differed fundamentally on what kind of dress would deliver a desirable picture of "me", a picture of who I wanted to look like as I grew into adulthood.

She was so taken with one pink cotton dress it almost embarrassed me. "See," she murmured, "little cap sleeves. So adorable!" She didn't seem to see that the dress would hang with perfection on a Hollywood actress portraying a romantic version of what it was like to be a sharecropper's wife. I mean, pink or no, this dress was drab.

I squirmed and said non-committal things and my mother was so wonderful that she said, "Oh well, let's keep going, we can always come back." She didn't argue with me or act impatient at all. And I bet her feet were hurting. But, she just went with me to the next store. And in one of those next stores, we found the dress that was perfect, that I was so excited to put on and to wear to my 8th-grade graduation.

My mom was not only nice during this entire excursion, she was fun to be with. One of the nicest things about her was that she didn't pussyfoot around when it came to describing a situation. She told it like it was. This characteristic was sometimes hilarious, but it became unnerving if her scathing remarks were due to a paranoid perception of what was happening. But when she was funny, she was funny.

I loved to go with my mother on errands. I would get to see so much of the adult world. Sometimes the buildings we went into were huge, the ceilings would sometimes be three or four stories above the floor. You could tell, when you entered an establishment that had a four-story ceiling, that the people who worked here were people of significance. But, my mom never seemed intimidated. She just marched up to tellers and bank representatives and attorneys and presented her papers and expected to get what she came for. That approach taught me a lot about submission. That is, that it was to be avoided. The direct approach was what would get you what you wanted. At least at the level of transactions that my mom was involved in.

Christmases were wonderful at the old house I grew up in. My mom bought the presents in her "spare" time and then arranged them on three different living room armchairs, all the presents for each child put on a separate chair. She didn't have time to wrap them, and I don't think she had the desire to visualize what a Christmas present would look like once it was all wrapped up. Wrapping presents was too much like "crafts", and my mom was definitely not a crafts person. She might buy a big package of Oreos for a Valentine's Day party for 2nd graders, but she never once, during my childhood, baked cookies for our special occasions. She wasn't a cookie-maker, she was a money maker!

Our presents were, to a large extent, practical. A new quilted robe, blue for me, pink for my sister. Slippers. One of us got a new game of Monopoly, our old one having been played to cardboard disintegration. Books. Coloring books. Crayons. Colored pencils. A new sweater. Gloves. Scarves. A "Paint by Number" paint set. There were some presents that were purely "toys", but usually the presents we got were things we could wear or use in our everyday lives.

For the first time in my life I realize, now, as I write this, what it must have been like for my baby brother, when all the excitement of Christmas devolved into sweaters and gloves and new pajamas. He was the only male in the house. I'll bet he wanted some of the kinds of toys that boys love. When I was nine, he was five. He would have loved an electric train! Maybe he didn't get one because my mom didn't have the money to afford one. And he did get toys. I think that when he was about five he got a tricycle. And somewhere in there the three of us got a shared red wagon, too. That gave us great fun and many scraped knees.

But my little brother was in some ways so alone in the celebration of Christmas, because there was no one to share his male joy at the sight of a shiny new tricycle. At the same time, it was my mom's love and my mom's sacrifice that made the tricycle show up. Did he, I wonder, try to make himself feel a sense of excitement at the ownership of new, furry slippers? Does it hurt to try to make

yourself feel things that you really don't feel? Or does it hurt more to admit to yourself that you have not much joy?

How much does it hurt a little boy to admit that his Christmas presents were mostly not the kinds that make little boys' hearts burst with excitement? While his sisters, on the other hand, are in a frenzy of happy ownership of new baubles. Did he think, "Why can't I have the joy that they have?"

I have thought so much about my baby brother, who died when he was only a young man of 17. My rage at not being able to protect him has done nothing but increase as my own babies were born and grew and got treated for any illnesses. How come my little brother didn't get the same attention to the details of how he was feeling? How come he didn't get serious and immediate medical attention for the feeling he had that needles were stuck in the middle of his head, or that he sometimes had intense head pains that would come and go, for a couple of years before he died? If he had been my baby son, my wonderful growing child, that benign brain tumor would have been imaged, six ways from Sunday, at the soonest possible appointment. But he wasn't my child, so I couldn't save him, and I will always feel the hugest guilt for that. I only love him more as the years go by. My baby brother, Rossie.

My poor mother felt a huge sense of guilt about my brother's death. I tremble to think about the years that passed, that he told my mom he had head pains, before he finally saw a doctor. Okay, two years, not 20. But two years is a lot, where head pains are concerned. And then, in the end, Ross never showed up for the test. Well, all of this happened because I was not his mother. If I had been his mother, everything would have been different. I would have BRIBED him if I'd had to, to get him to doctor's appointments and tests, and all.

But my mother couldn't do this. And I mean it literally. She was in the middle of a dissolving marriage, she had serious emotional problems, and her children didn't clamor to be around her any more. Life was getting krappier and krappier, and she still had 50 years to go. She looked into the future and saw no joy, and had no will to create any. She was too sad. And there could have been so much happiness.

Here is what happened the Thanksgiving that was right before my 17th birthday:

I wanted our family to have on of those Thanksgivings like you see in ladies' magazines and homemaking magazines. We weren't going to have turkey, not plain old turkey! We were going to have duck! And my mother's special fruit and cream cheese salad, and all kinds of things that we had for years made just for the holidays. I was at work on the food from about 6 AM on. But no one was interested. My mother was angry with my stepfather Art, screaming mad, and under these conditions it was hard for my brother and sister to want to be anywhere near the kitchen, which was the center for screaming fits. But I was

determined. Maybe once the duck was cooked to perfection and everyone had become mellow from eating delicious food, things would change.

But things got worse, angrier, louder, awfuller. For some reason we all decided to pile into the car and go from Green Lake to downtown, and look at all the Christmas lights. But guess what? On Thanksgiving night, after dinner, there are no people wandering the streets looking at closed-up stores. Maybe the few there were had not had a Thanksgiving dinner. My sister and I passed these people because, during one of her angrier moments, my mother demanded that my sister and I get out of the car, in the middle of downtown. She said the rest of the family would pick us up in a little while.

It was cold. But Chris and I loved it. It reminded us of Christmas. Unlike the tears that were drying on our cheeks. Why did our mother sometimes act as if she hated us? I was crying as I got out of the car, and asked my mother, "Why are you so mean, I was only trying to make a nice Thanksgiving for us?" She had no comeback, so she snorted. Chris and I walked around a dark and mostly unpopulated downtown for about 20 minutes, then my mom saw us and asked my stepfather to stop and pick us up. She said nothing about the dinner, nothing about the fight, nothing about anything. I felt so empty. Because I had figured out why my mother was acting this way. Now that we were almost grown up, she had begun to resent us. She was sure that we were not going to love her any more, and so she was preparing herself for this awful eventuality by stopping her love for us, first.

But these times of tears and broken hearts were things that occurred in our later teen-aged years. This heartbreak, as bad as it was, never negated or destroyed the many unconscious joys we had as children, living for those seven years with my mom in that big house on Capitol Hill. Learning to grow sweet peas against the side of the house, training our Golden Retriever, "Rinty" to "sit" and "lie down", learning how to make blackberry pies from scratch, making our living room and dining room into places you could take pictures of, pictures of families enjoying each other's company, getting to know our neighbors, swimming in the summer in the community wading pool, and so many other things. In many ways, I had a wonderful childhood, from the age of seven to the age of fourteen. Outside those years, the challenges were sometimes hard.

The wonderful parts were mostly thanks to my mom. Kisses good-night were the norm, and should be. Christmas was as festive as our means could allow. We all loved our home, our refuge (well, maybe my little brother was indifferent to home design). Hot breakfasts, wholesome (groan, whole wheat everything) food, we had it all. In the midst of the checkerboard of good and evil, we definitely had a lot of white spaces. All because of my mom.

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