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More Than A Mere Image

Dodi Dolendi

“Turn that thing down!” Mom yelled as she, my sister, and I entered the living room where the TV was blaring. We hurried in from the kitchen with a family-sized Tupperware bowl of that newfangled Jiffy Pop popcorn. We will never buy that again. Like a failed science fair project, the mushroom cloud of aluminum foil rose atop the flimsy pie-tin pan when heated and exploded into a smoldering disaster of charred ash that stunk up the place for days—or maybe just hours. The fallout: Mom was doomed to slave over her avocado-green stove and butter us up with real home-cooked love, if she were to be a good wife and mother. As I observed, I developed a severe allergy to cooking. We rushed to wash, dry, and put away the Sunday dinner dishes. None of us wanted to miss a moment of our other Sunday evening staple: *The Ed Sullivan Show*. “Hush now,” Mom said. Like a good little girl, I kept quiet, watched TV, and followed the unspoken rules that for generations defined “women’s work” and “place.” (Much to my displeasure.)

Conformity to archaic gender and generational standards never fared well with me. Interestingly enough, the very generation that deposited 76 million Baby Boomers in America, that demanded their offspring to “do as I say” simply “because I said so,” regularly gathered us on our plastic-covered sofas, in front of the nation’s first television sets that signaled a conflicting, yet defining message to individuate. The messages swirled in the air like the cigarette smoke that clouded America’s front rooms.

Through the smoke screen, “boomers” and their parents sat and watched as every “really big shew” entertained an enormous ego. The music catered to the “self.” We willingly absorbed Sammy Davis Jr.’s lyrical suggestion: “I gotta be me.” We boldly noted as often as Frank Sinatra did: “I did it my way.” Quickly and collectively, consciously and unconsciously, “boomers” consumed and proudly wore our labels: The “Me” Generation. I was no different.

Is it any wonder that I would sit on a fifty-year-long fence, convinced that becoming “me” meant individuating completely from my mother? Given a dollar for every person who ever told me “You look just like your mother” or even worse, “You *are* just like your mother,” surely I would have amassed an Oprah Winfrey-like fortune. These complimentary observations were handed out freely, but I would have gladly traded them all for poverty and a mirror image that reflected only me. Silly? Maybe. Maybe not. Apparently, many females share my antipathy for looking or being like their mothers, at least according to the *unscientific* data I gathered in my informal study. For months, I told every female I encountered how much she looked like her mother. The rolling eyes, audible tsks and ghastly sighs (responses much like my own) far outnumbered the occasional shy, polite smile. Absolutely no one thanked me for the compliment. I wanted to believe I was not alone in my aversion, and now I could.

“When I was a child, I spoke...thought...and reasoned like a child.” 1

Corinthians 13:11

“What do you believe?” Mom asked me.

“I believe *you*, Mommy,” I replied, tearfully and naïvely.

Mom’s word, like God’s, was gospel to me. I was only eight and three quarters years old when my so-called friends tried to shatter my entire belief system by throwing Santa Claus (*and* the Easter Bunny) out the window. Lord, help me! Would Jesus be the next to go?

“My mother doesn’t lie,” I shouted in protest at the schoolyard bullies. “She detests liars.”

Mom seemed proud that I hadn’t taken a lot of “guff” from anyone, just as she had taught. I did, however, fall (hook, line, and sinker), for her story just one last time. Mom claimed I *had* to believe if I really wanted whatever I was hoping for (and I did). Turns out, Mom lied. I just didn’t know then that Santa Claus would be the least significant myth set up and later dispelled for me.

Faithfully, I watched as the Cleavers and the Nelsons broadcast their neatly boxed, black and white, dreamy model of the perfect American family. (They were the Baby Boomers’ “reality TV.”) Religiously, I listened as the Beatles chimed in on my transistor radio, all the way from Liverpool, with their lyrical ideal: “All you need is love.” (They were the Baby Boomers’ American Idols). Media influences in hand, I earnestly observed, compared, and concluded that my parents had kept up with the soft-spoken, understanding, loving, successful, unstressed, functional, close-knit TV Jones’s remarkably well. So well in fact, that the morning of my wedding, April Fool’s Day, 1978, I cried as I vowed to model my marriage (and someday, my family) after theirs. Mom cried too as she gently pulled the veil over my face and sent me on my way to pursue my dreams.

“When I grew up, I put away childish things.” 1 Corinthians 13:11b

I don’t know why my Mom decided my wedding was her cue to unveil the imperfections in her marriage. Was there some sort of unspoken rite of passage that moved me from Mom’s daughter to best girlfriend/confidante just because I was married? They didn’t show that on TV! (Come to think of it, the Cleavers and Nelsons had only boys.) I guess mothers are different with girls. But what do I know? I also have only boys. My son’s new bride laughs, almost hysterically, as she confides that her mom started “telling all this negative ‘stuff’ about my dad and marriage immediately after the wedding.” We both grew up with the same perception: our parents *were* the Cleavers, *were* the Nelsons, perfectly paired and bound to live happily ever after.

I suppose we could consider ourselves lucky to have mothers who unexpectedly lose their minds and filters to lovingly speak the truth, even if we can’t handle the truth. One of my friends, a newly divorced mother of three, admired my mother’s honesty. She said, with her mother, “it took many years and a divorce to get to that point.” Still, I really didn’t want to hear Mom’s myth-busting honesty or her complaints. Had she forgotten that was *my father* she was griping about? The Beatles kept singing in my ear: “Nothing you can say but you can learn how to play the game. It’s easy. All you need is love.” Respectfully and lovingly, I played the obedient daughter and listened. (Although, privately, I

always sided with Daddy.)

“Love is patient and kind...love never fails.” *1 Corinthians 13:4, 8a*

My listening-to-mom days ended when I became a mother. Mom and I engaged in a conflict over domestic policies as senseless and long-lasting as the Vietnam War. We came to motherhood from contradictory points of view. Mom fired away with lectures that compared my parenting skills, or lack thereof, to her own. Hers, of course, were *the most* highly effective. (Her opinion, not mine.) My rolling eyes overtly indicated that I thought I knew better. She must have forgotten that as the youngest I watched her parenting strategies bomb three times. I retaliated. I waged verbal warfare. I shot down all advice. I refused to take orders. I would not repeat my mother’s mistakes and I told her so. I openly judged her, perhaps as harshly as she judged herself: a failure.

In the heat of battle, I was often sad for my mother. Maybe just once I should have lied, like she did about Santa, so she could have had what she had most hoped for: appreciation for her loving, diligent, and thankless life-long work as a mother. From me, she got no lies. I was not about to let her forget that she detested liars. If I were completely truthful, I knew my mother had tried her best, like every mother, including me, to be the best possible parent. I was fully aware that children came without manuals. I was sad for myself too. Maybe scared was more like it. Scared to become her and to fail...to fail her, myself, or worse—my children.

If only I had turned up my transistor radio and listened more carefully to Edwin Starr’s repetitive refrain, I would have known that “war” was “good for—absolutely nothing.” But the war was on. I would parent differently, better. (Oh, the flagrant arrogance of every generation to be better than the one before it.) Mom no longer occupied the godly pedestal I had set her on. I had knocked her off forever!

“Now I see in a mirror, dimly...” *1 Corinthians 13:12*

My parents, unlike TV parents, did not occupy my childhood home forever. They retired from Chicago to New Mexico two years after my wedding, which added new fuel—abandonment—to the fiery conflict already raging between my mother and me. I struggled to distinguish between my heart’s relief that I would no longer have my marriage and family under Mom’s microscope and my disappointment and anger that I would no longer have hers under mine. We were like two mad scientists conducting marriage and family research: she, the expert, already drawing conclusions, and me, her protégée, still experimenting to find better methods.

My hypothesis, simple: I would never lose my “self” in my marriage the way my mother had.

My formula, easy: Do nothing Mom did.

I would not give up my religion for anyone; bear more children than I *really* wanted (I knew how it felt to be the fourth, unwanted child); forfeit career and personal goals; lose sight of my passions; become anyone’s scullery maid;

become wholly dependent, financially or emotionally, on my husband; or ever remain in a loveless or stagnant marriage. Instead, I'd do it "my way." I would follow my own faith in a different denomination than my husband's; joyfully accept two boys and decidedly stop trying for a girl despite my husband's desire for one; pursue a meaningful career to use my God-given gifts; and participate, with and without my family, in social, academic, and spiritual activities that brought purpose and joy to my life. As a mother, I would not show favoritism, lie (not even about Santa), or give up couplehood upon motherhood. Instead, I would celebrate and encourage my children's uniqueness and independence, lovingly speak and demand the truth, and hire babysitters regularly to preserve intimacy in my marriage.

"Then we shall see face to face." 1 Corinthians 13:12

The geographical distance did not slow Mom and me down. For twenty-six years, our lab was the telephone, where brutally honest data was exchanged in daily, often explosive conversations. We never affirmed. Rarely agreed. Often criticized. But *always* called for more. Until Alzheimer's Disease disconnected us. The cruel thief robbed Mom of her memory and stole our phone connection. I miss talking to her, even arguing with her. In the silence, the memory of my harsh words, not hers, haunts me. But the memory-destroying monster graciously allows me also to forget what Mom no longer remembers.

The one moment I'd love to forget—I can't. The moment I entered her hospital room: the image of Mom's thin, frail body swallowed up in the bed, the room, the coma. Her skin was transparent, like cellophane; her hair, a colorless mess; her skeleton as evident as a starving African child's. Where was the mother I looked like? I could barely whisper, "Hi Mom," as I reached for her hand. The doctor spoke of miracles when, after four days at death's door, Mom opened her eyes, looked into mine, smiled and proclaimed, "You're the one who calls all the time." She remembered my voice.

I will never forget those last days. We laughed and cried, admired and hugged, talked and prayed and loved, like never before (or perhaps like always), being mother and daughter. Although my name escaped her, she still knew me. "You," she specifically recalled, "you were the honest one."

What remains in the wake of Mom's death is her wisdom—motherly wisdom that separated Santa from Jesus, fairytales from reality, and lies from truth in order that her child might expect and experience a more realistic, attainable family life and love, as opposed to a mere image.

"then will I know fully, even as I am fully known." 1 Corinthians 13:12b

I think that Mom and I both understood the immense truth declared by essayist and memoirist Vivian Gornick, that a "betrayal of love is *required* in order that one become." Inequities and battle scars aside, together we pushed each other forward and held each other accountable until we found, embraced, and became "selves" not merely wives, mothers, daughters, and friends, but lovely and loved women, in God's own image. I no longer look in the mirror with rolling eyes; I smile and give a knowing nod to me "reflecting mom." I am far less myopic now. Yet, still

inherently stubborn, I refused to see what Pulitzer Prize-winning American author, Annie Dillard, saw without ever knowing either of us: that Mom “painstakingly reared [me] to [my] personal omniscience.” And the all-knowing John Lennon sings to me (this time on my Ipod), “Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time. It’s easy. All you need is love... Love is all you need.”