

13th Storyworth: What Was Your Mother Like When You Were A Child? - Revised

My Mom was a mix of paradoxes. To begin with, her name was Mercedes Drout, and I have no idea why my grandparents named her Mercedes, a name which has ONLY German connotations to me, while they were as Irish as it gets. To her friends, she was “Mercy”, and her children ALL laughed out loud when, at her Catholic funeral, the priest said ‘Lord, Have Mercy’. But she had that same kind of personality, with the ability to see the humor in most things.

I suppose I would be remiss in not acknowledging her parental foibles, which included coming after me with a wiffle ball bat, a wire or a wooden hanger, whenever she felt I was in need of some corporal punishment. On the other hand, most of my memories of my Mom were more favorable. I suspect some of my reasoning for that has more to do with my CHOICE to view here mostly favorably, despite knowing she was human and therefore had some flaws. Just like me ;-)

It was only after her death that I learned from my sisters of the extent of my Father’s abuse of them, and in retrospect I believe my Mom was well aware of his behaviors and did not stop him. So I have mixed emotions about her, not least because I can recall specific incidents where I observed my Dad to do things I knew even then were inappropriate. But I was mostly sheltered from them as well, and don’t really know I could have done much about it even had I been aware, sadly. So I CHOOSE to think of my Mom by viewing her through “rose colored glasses”, even as I can see she was flawed, at least as far as my sisters and nieces were concerned.

My Mom loved her parents, even as she suffered I am sure because her own mother seemed to remain so distant, as I have observed in earlier stories. And I also think she MEANT well in raising her own children, all six of us, even as she could have made some better choices in some areas. I think she gets some kudos points, however, when realized that she became a Type One Diabetic while she was pregnant with her first child, Peggy, at age 17, and Peggy was born Hydrocephalic, which means she had brain damage due to pressure in her head similar to the symptoms of “Mad Cow” disease (Dawn disputes this descriptor). To live with the burden of such a child even as she raised another five who were “relatively” more normal meant she had to mature a lot in a very short period of time. Peggy lasted until age 7 but was institutionalized long before I knew her.

It should be noted that my Mom grew up during the Depression, and lived her teen years through WWII. That HAD to affect her view of the world, yet she seemed well adjusted to most people I suppose. Because of my Dad’s career choices, and changes between being a Funeral Director and a door to door salesman to selling carpeting, it was essential for her to have a career outside the house even when most of her peers were “stay at home moms”. So she worked at places like Vassar College in a clerical role, which had some interesting impact on ME. One frustration, though, was her insistence that if she was up and working, we had to be ;-)

Not the least impact was her insistence that I, and all her kids, learn the English language and proper grammar and spelling. When I compare our language skills to SO MANY of our contemporaries, I am deeply troubled at how much we spend as taxpayers for public education and such poor results overall. My Mom was ALSO very good at Math, so I know I didn’t lick it off the ground. I doubt she ever was exposed much to Calculus and higher order things like Differential Equations, but she was the one whose skills at reading, comprehension and mathematical implications made me so good at filling out a 1040 ;-)

So I am sure she was disappointed in me when I failed 9th grade my first try, even though she seemed to roll with the punches more than might have otherwise been expected. But she ALWAYS had high enough expectations of all her kids that we, certainly when viewed from our statistical starting points, are a surprisingly accomplished lot, especially academically. Only one of we remaining five does NOT have at least a Master’s degree; Barb, who became a nurse.

And my Mom was proud of my performance, which I am sure reflected her “first born son” expectations and her background. I believe she understood that I would become an Engineer long before I had any clue what that might mean, as she would be the first to tell you how I had disassembled things from the earliest age, but started to repair them from age 5, and by 8 she never took ANYTHING to someone else before she had ME look at it first. That had one funny outcome when, many years later, she had discussed her finances with my sister Barb, who was actually the most business-astute of the lot of us. When Barb subsequently told me of her discussion, and I suggested that I had told Mom no different, Barb said she’d needed “to hear it from a penis” ;-)

Mom was always able to find humor in most situations, which I suppose is where I get my own approach to much of life. Everyone in the family tells of her episode at a Friendly’s when she ordered a banana split, and having it arrive piled with three scoops, whipped cream, hot fudge and the like, and topped with chocolate sprinkles. She complained to the waitress that she could not have sprinkles, because “she was a diabetic”. We know she didn’t see the absurdity at the time, but we also know she would have laughed loudest and longest once she recognized it later.

She loved card games, especially pinochle and cribbage, as well as board games like Monopoly. But I don’t recall her ever seeming much interested in Chess. So I would suggest she liked games of chance more than strategy, although SHE was not a gambler, even as my Dad had a serious defect that way. She played piano pretty well, so it was surprising that I seemed to resist it, like foreign languages in school, until I eventually became self-taught on guitar in college. I suppose that shows my “rebellious” nature toward my parents. I was always that when it came to my spending money, and my Mom was never reluctant to see me have both the freedom and responsibility to provide for my own spending money and choices.

My Mom was funny in some of the ways she seemed to deny reality even as she gave other evidence of embracing it. So when we had circumstances occur which put Lynne in the position of living briefly at my house, Mom insisted we attend her catholic church, the same Regina Coeli (pronounced ray-geena chaley) I had attended into the sixth grade, only to have her pull me out when at mid-year they had not yet OPENED the science books while my contemporaries were studying jet engines in the public school she then sent me. She felt we needed to practice religion while we were under her roof, yet I am sure she knew we were sexually active long before we actually married, and seemed to give us our private time. Odd ;-)

My Dad was impulsive as a driver, and probably better described as lucky to have fast reflexes than to have talent, whereas my Mom was reliable. I never felt threatened when she drove, and always made good time. As noted in earlier stories, she used to drive the two plus hours each way to the Bronx to visit her parents, and she was my favored driving instructor. I like to think she was the basis for my own Instructor bent, which has been a trait for me on most everything I have EVER done. Even my writing, I am sure, comes across as a bit of lecture and lesson. I think you can blame my Mom. And you can certainly blame her for my integrity, which mattered to her a LOT.

My Mom seemed to understand me as well as anyone could, I suppose. She might not have grasped WHY, perhaps, but when she went to Cape Cod for a vacation one year just after I’d married Lynne, she gave me a specially made display case with some seashells and a Porsche 911 Targa model YEARS before I actually bought my first. So the one thing I am sure of is that she paid ATTENTION to me in ways I’ll never really even understand. Because she GOT me, as only a Mother ever can. I miss her. But when she passed in 1996 she had stopped paying on a life insurance policy only 10 months prior. And as her Executor, I discovered that I had only to pay those past premiums to reinstate the policy for its \$10K face value, which gave each of us kids \$2K. I am sure she would have been proud for my insistence and ingenuity ;-)

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