

A Deeper Understanding of Mom

Still So Much to Share, and to Learn

By LISA ST. JOHN

DURING our time together, I keep asking my mother to repeat the stories of her childhood, not unlike the begging I did as a child, imploring her to read "Sleeping Beauty" over and over again. And while she talks, I pepper her with questions, each time learning something new about her life. Until now all that had been forthcoming was a rough sketch of her life, but lately, as she turns 71 this spring, I've felt a profound need to be closer to her.

Like her, I am also a mother of four. We easily relate to each other through the grandchildren. The hourglass is emptying and I am ready now to talk to her in a deeper way, probing to reach the girl of her childhood.

I have gleaned a few pearls . . . her early devotions, books and the piano, then later, mathematics and sports: tidbits revealed through the years. I learned that a bout of scarlet fever stole her hearing for two weeks when she was 2 years old, leaving her eardrums punctured. I knew of various incidents, but longed to understand her emotions associated with those experiences.

I wonder if my mom has any regrets. She shared with me that after college in the late 1950's, she worked for a large insurance company and

was one of a few employees selected to learn computer skills. She declined a stimulating and lucrative job track because she knew that it would conflict with being a wife and mother. I, too, often struggled with my decision to stay home and raise my family.

Still, she told me, "I would still make the same choice today."

When her older brother, my uncle Russell, went off to war, the family said goodbye, yet no one cried except



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my mother. "I was furious at my parents for not crying," she said. Her revelation saddened me: as a child, I rarely saw her cry. In her own childhood, there was no room for emotion. For the first time I understood why my expressive nature frightened her.

Whenever we jog or walk, I press her for more intimate stories, asking her how it felt to grow up the first daughter, the third child of six chil-

dren. What were the games of her youth? Her favorite books? What color was her bedroom? My mother and I stop beside the bridge overlooking the Croton Reservoir, silently taking in the sky and water before resuming our brisk five-mile trek.

On another trip, I ask her for more details about my grandmother, whose gifted piano hands betrayed her with a diagnosis of Parkinson's disease. My young mother watched her own mother withdraw from the world as the ravages of her disease caused my grandmother to withdraw from the company of others, even though at the time she was in her early 50's. She retired to her bedroom and never left until her death, a decade later. My grandmother never communicated any of her struggle or heartache to her children.

Last October, as we strolled with the autumn leaves underfoot, I asked her about friends who had died or were dying. "It's hard to be the last one," she told me. My father died of lung cancer at 58, and since then their best friends are dying, one after the other. Recently, her best friend Ann, died of cancer, within months of her husband. I know how much my mom misses them.

Spring is returning and we have resumed our outings on the bike path. Recently my 7-year-old niece Ramona asked her grandmother, "What does it feel like to be you, Grandma?" My mother answered thoughtfully.

"I feel very young on the inside," she said and hesitated before adding, "There is so much I want to learn."

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