

So Much of Who I Am is Because of My Mother

By Bill Zirinsky

So much of who I am is because of my mother. It feels like a very long time ago to me, now, but there was a time when she was the person I loved and admired most in the world. She was my best friend when I was a little boy.

I got my desire to express myself from my mother. She was outspoken, she was articulate, she was passionate about her views and about the world she lived in. She believed in saying what she felt. She believed in expressing love and she believed in expressing anger. She cried deeply when life hurt, and sometimes she didn't hide her tears from her children. She liked to read, and she liked to write. She spent many an afternoon pecking away on her typewriter. Much of what she wrote was about her marriage and family, and reading it now it is repetitive and tiresome, but it is also insightful. She was an independent, postwar, 50's and 60's New York suburban woman, ahead of her time in her feminism, formed by Freud and the Roosevelts and the decency of her parents.

"She was engaging, she was warm, she was fiery, she was flirtatious, she was curious, she was loving, but sweet she was not."

I got my temper from my mother. No one would have ever called my mother sweet, and she hated the word. She was engaging, she was warm, she was fiery, she was flirtatious, she was curious, she was loving, but sweet she was not. All her four children had her temper; none of us had our father's quieter and more restrained disposition.

I got my provocativeness from my mother. My mother loved to provoke a good conversation, she liked the pointed question, sometimes she loved a good argument, she liked to put you on the witness stand, sometimes she wanted a real fight. At our dining room table, you had to know how to defend yourself verbally, and we did.

I got my passion from my mother. My mother loved life. She loved the ocean, and I love the ocean. She was the kind of woman for whom a great Chinese dinner was "the most superb Chinese meal I've ever had". She came to love Italy and the Italian people, and so we spent five full summers there, and we all loved Italy, too. She loved her children deeply and dearly, and so do I. She loved her children almost too much, and their pains were her pains, only multiplied. Maybe that's just what mothers do, maybe not, I don't know, she's the only one I've had.

She was passionate about my father, and their relationship veered from Tracy and Hepburn to "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?". I have been passionate about the people I



Helen Zirinsky and her father, Sam Gelsey, and her first born daughter, Jane.

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have loved. She was a passionate friend to her women friends. She had good and strong and textured friendships with the women in her life. For my part, I learned about good and strong friendships from her, and I have those kinds of relationships with my closest male and female friends.

She was deeply loyal to her women friends, and she was there for them when they needed her. She wasn't afraid to be intimate and disclosing about her life with her friends, and I think her friends treasured that in her. They confided in her, they gossiped with her, they cried with her. And she was a mentor to younger women, first to my sisters' friends, and then later to other smart younger women. She was, to them, a very strong and ferocious woman, and yet playful and funny and generous of heart. The younger women



Helen Zirinsky

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whose lives she touched found her "unafraid" to a degree that is rarely seen in a woman of her generation in our society.

I got my good looks and charm from my mother. Considering my gray hair and middle-aged paunch, and my politically correct Ann Arbor demeanor, one wouldn't necessarily know that I had been good-looking and charming at a younger age. But I was. And I got it from her.

I got my politics from my mother. She was an Adlai Stevenson/ John F. Kennedy/ John Lindsay liberal who later loved Bella Abzug, Bill Clinton and Hillary Clinton. And so did I, though in between I also loved Jerry Brown and Jimmy Carter. She was for the

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underdog, she was comfortable with people of all races and religions, she intensely disliked hypocrisy and facade, and she *hated* Richard Nixon and Roy Cohn.

I got my outgoing nature from my mother. My mother was a beautiful and self-possessed young woman, and my father became a very successful and wealthy businessman at an unusually early age. So they traveled widely in Europe as a young couple in the 1950's and 60's, sometimes with their children, and sometimes without us. And my mother was as comfortable creating friendships with the grandson of the Kaiser and the young Marlon Brando, while on board the French Ocean Liner the SS Liberte, or with Cardinal Vagnozzi, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, as she was comfortable getting to know the details of the family lives of our local butcher and grocer. Her outgoing nature was actualized — her life was full of interesting encounters and interesting friendships and lively dinner parties. She was, as I said, *unafraid*, having been bathed in her father's gentle and adoring love, and having the self-confidence of a girl who had always been smart and beautiful and easily generous. My outgoing nature, while no match for hers, was more apparent in my self-confident youth. Now it is somewhat quiescent. But it certainly does surface fairly often, and I did get it from her.

My mother placed great value in the phrase "to thine own self be true". In other words, be yourself, actualize yourself, find yourself. As an "empty-nester" in the early 1970's, she went off to Esalen Institute, and later to a Sensory Awareness workshop in Mexico, and to a silent retreat at a Buddhist center. She encouraged me to find my own way, she believed in psychotherapy, and she knew it was important to be authentic. Let me tell you, she was way ahead of the curve when it came to authenticity. She was decrying



photo by Larry Zirinsky

In Spain, with three of her four children ~ Nancy, John, and Jane.

My mother used to say to my father, "Larry, all it is going to say on your tombstone is 'husband and father'".

the "man in the gray flannel suit" way ahead of Betty Friedan, and she had no use for suburban conventions, nor for the platitudes of suburban reform Judaism of the 1960's, nor for the "Goodbye, Columbus" materialism of her era and her milieu. When I wanted to go off and live for three months at a residential Gestalt therapy institute in Italy at the age of 19, she was all for it. It is not surprising that the business I own (with my wife, Ruth) is a "bookstore about consciousness". My interest in "man's search for meaning" (the title of a book by Victor Frankl) came from my mother. I got my interest in doing good, and being good, from my mother. Crazy Wisdom Bookstore exists as it is because of who my mother was, and the values she imparted to me.

My mother used to say to my father, "Larry, all it is going to say on your tombstone is 'husband and father'". Not real estate developer, not Landlord to the New York Times and AT&T and Pfizer. Not the man who lives in the mansion up the hill. Only that you were a husband and father. I got from my mother, then, that love is what matters, not money. Who we love, and how fully we love, and how dearly we care for the people who matter most to us. That is what mattered to her, and it's what matters to me. I got this from my mother.

I got my nastiness, my meanness, from my mother. She had quite a tongue. She fought with my father like a witch, like a harridan, like a she-cat. She forgot nothing, and she didn't let him forget that she forgot nothing. His four older sisters apparently slighted her when she was new in the family, and boy she made hay with that for fifty years! Can you blame those four sisters, brought up in a post-Victorian and somewhat cold household, for casting dark eyes on this beautiful young upstart that their younger brother brought home? Well, she did. *Forever*. And she knew how to make my father pay. And when we four kids became young adults, she had a terrible time letting go. And she could be mean and vicious. I got that from my mother, too. Though I do really work on it, and have worked on it, and I can only hope that my version is a tamer, milder version (as in a kinder, gentler nation).

I got my good heart from my mother. She had an awful lot of heart. She mothered two daughters with significant challenges. My oldest sister was born with cerebral palsy, and my mother was such a wonderful mother to Jane, and an advocate for her, and a friend to her. My mother fought to mainstream Jane when she was a school girl in the 1950's (Jane was highly intelligent, and spoke four languages, and she eventually became a Ph.D. candidate in the area of Sexuality for the Disabled) before the concept of "mainstreaming" had even entered the vocabulary.

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My other sister, Nancy, suffered from bipolar disorder. She was a smart, pretty, sassy and popular schoolgirl, and the onset of her illness in her college years traumatized my mother. Nancy was institutionalized numerous times in her adulthood, and my sister's bipolar episodes always threw my mother into a "tailspin". (Nancy's illness destroyed her health and she passed away a few years ago.)

My mother suffered through her daughters' heartaches, and their setbacks, and their pain, and their misery. And she cried. And she stood behind them and encouraged them. And loved them fiercely. And she loved her two sons and husband.

She never lost heart, through five decades of parenting, until she had to watch Jane die an agonizing and slow hospital death at the age of 49. Then she lost heart. But until then she had great heart for the people around her, and for life itself. I can't say I have a great heart, as she did. I wish I knew how to let the tears flow, as she did. But I do have a good heart, and I am resilient. My resilience and my heart come from my mother.

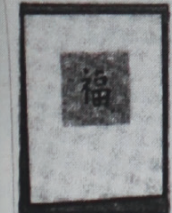
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"...My mother had great heart for the people around her, and for life itself."

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