

"Tell it like it is:" honoring our mothers

by *Jean Kilheffer Hess*

A mother is a woman who gives a child insider-clues about living, who shapes a daughter's world in significant ways. For some, biology creates the pair. For others, the one who nurtures and guides—who mothers—is unrelated to her children by blood.

Mothers can inspire their daughters to resist society's stultifying influence on girls and model how to live with spirit. At the same time, mothers hold incredible power to fasten in place the soul-killing straightjacket of gender stereotypes for their daughters and sons by singing the tune of patriarchal oppression right on pitch.

Mothers face stereotypes as well. Recently a friend thanked me for "mothering" her in the midst of a personal crisis. She meant it as a compliment spoken out of gratitude, but when I heard her words, something within me felt askew. I realized that common usage assigns a negative connotation to mothering. "Stop mothering me!" equates mothering with being bossy or overbearing. This attitude dishonors women who mother in so many healthy ways.

May has become a month to honor mothers and all women who care about and nurture others. I do not have children. I recall my shock as I listened to women who raised children to adulthood describe how distressing Mother's Day can be for them. One shared that amidst the accolades about perfect mothers, she often felt inadequate and found that her own parenting regrets came to the fore. How can we honor our "mothers" in a way that includes the realities of life with grace and grit?

To honor is first of all to acknowledge. Appreciation follows, which is simply recognizing the difference a person has made in your life. Acting on your understanding completes the steps of honoring.

If your experience has been healthy, celebrate it, thank the living ones you honor, and tell the story. If it has been hurtful, review the damage with a steady eye, find companions for the healing

journey, and tell the story when you can.

I realize that's a rather philosophical approach to honoring. What might a practical, everyday life approach look like?

Recently my pastor, Sue Conrad, preached a sermon that included the admonition to "stop, listen, love." This trio strikes me as a good rule of thumb for many of life's opportunities and challenges, and it fits well with a practical suggestion for honoring our mothers: stop and listen to their life stories.

I suspect mothers sometimes feel invisible. Statistics show that even in households where the affirmed intent of both spouses is to share the homemaking equally, women end up with a much higher burden of housekeeping chores and child care. Single moms keep the household wheels turning primarily on their own, their monumental efforts often unnoticed by anyone on a daily basis.

One way to honor the mothers in your life is to let them know they're noticed by taking the time to listen to their stories and ask about their life experiences. Go beyond "How are you?" to "What was it like growing up a middle child in a minister's family?" or "How did you decide to pursue art as your vocation?"

In *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Sue Monk Kidd says, "In a way humans are not made of skin and bone as much as we're made of stories." As you listen to a woman's stories, you learn what she has faced in life, how she makes sense of it, and how it has shaped her and maybe you. You honor her by listening well and without immediate judgment.

Even if your mother is no longer living, you may have access to resources that convey parts of her story, such as living siblings or her words recorded in letters or in audio form.

Listening to a person's story is a way to honor even one who has caused harm. Let me be clear: there is no excuse for abuse. But the act of listening honors the fact that your lives entwined at points. And knowing her personal story may provide a stable place for your own next step towards healing.

As an independent scholar and historian focusing on oral history, I have the distinct pleasure of eliciting stories and listening well on a regular basis. In an interview with Miriam (Blank) LeFever



Mira Kauffman Blank (left) and her daughter, Miriam (Blank) LeFever regularly played Scrabble together in the 1950's.

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last spring, I noticed that she intermittently prefaced her comments with, "I hadn't thought of this until right now, but . . ." We are so unaccustomed to being asked carefully-chosen questions and then provided with undivided attention that I believe the situation cre-


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ates a holy space for self-reflection. Holy in the sense of separate and holy in the sense of kissed with the Spirit.

Among other things, I asked Miriam about significant lessons she learned from married life. Her response began with, "Well I certainly learned that there's a difference between two people. Lloyd was an introvert, and I was an extrovert. But that was good because I had to learn when to keep quiet, and he had to learn when to talk."

Regarding her mother, Mira Kauffman Blank: "My mother was outgoing, strong. When she wanted something done, she made every effort to do it. She was a businesswoman."

As to getting along with others: "I've always tried to find something good in everyone, even the nastiest person. I can find something so that in that way I can make them feel good about themselves."

Be aware that when you honor a woman by asking her to share, she likewise honors you when she trusts you with stories from her life. Stop and listen. The love just may flow both ways. 

Resources

Books

Kidd, Sue Monk. *Dance of the Dissident Daughter*. New York: Harper Collins, 1996.

Owens, Virginia Stem. *Caring for Mother: A Daughter's Long Goodbye*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox P, 2007.

Tannen, Deborah. *You're Wearing That? Understanding Mothers and Daughters in Conversation*. New York, NY: Random House, 2006.