



Pieces of Light

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Late morning sunlight slanted over my shoulder as I ripped open the envelope from my mother. Inside were articles dealing with the topic of the gifted child. I hoped to find help in coping with an intense, overbearing pre-schooler.

As my eyes scanned through the typical characteristics of the gifted child, I began to feel uneasy inside. The articles spoke of the problems that gifted children often face, how they are viewed by others, the social difficulties they encounter, the impatience they feel toward the discussions and activities of their peers. A lump blocked my throat.

I identified with much of what was being said. I wept as I read about the needs of the gifted child and how those needs can be met. The articles described all too well my childhood and my experience with school and peers.

Now, two decades after the agony of being misunderstood and often lonely, I realized that others also failed to fit in easily. More important, I saw that there was nothing inherently “wrong” with me.

The rejection I felt all through my school years flooded back into my memory and its pain resurfaced. I was angered at the suffering and wished I had been recognized for who I was. I felt I had been cheated out of my own potential during a large period of my life.

At the same time, I experienced relief that at last I understood my struggle. I was glad that now it was becoming at least somewhat acceptable to be the kind of person I was.

A few months later, as I visited with a teacher of gifted children who also knew my mother, she remarked “Your mother is a gifted person whose development has not been fostered.” Stunned, I stared out the window at the bright afternoon light.

Of course! Many things fit: her flowing creativity, her lifelong frustration with the never-ending but necessary mundanities of life, her surprising resourcefulness, her zest for doing things well and her sensitivity to others. To me she had often seemed a dynamic person whose world was small, consisting of the 160 acres we owned, her four children and her husband.

I liked my mother, and as I reflected on her life, I felt a sense of loss. She too had been treated as just one of the crowd. In my eyes, she had often been misunderstood and judged harshly. She had often been treated as someone with no promising potential.

Even worse, she seemed to view herself that way during my childhood. Education was a waste if invested in a female, and a occupation in the public realm was deemed unnecessary for her because she was a woman.

Furthermore, the church exploited the energy, dependability and warmth that she gave so willingly. What she accomplished was seen as one’s Christian duty. She was not openly affirmed or encouraged to develop her gifts, and she certainly was not

remunerated for her work. Yet the functions she performed were absolutely vital to the life of the church.

Now, as I recognize my own uniqueness, and try to understand my son, I see my mother as a living witness to the fact that who one is cannot be forever hidden, cannot be easily extinguished.

My mother entered the work force for the first time when she was in her mid-40s. Through her library work she has sharpened her inter-relational skills and has found an outlet for her creativity and her love of books and people. Many people know her and admire her. Although her diligence and initiative have led to increased library usage in her small town, her pay remains that of an uneducated worker.

My mother's survival is what encourages me. Pushed from the inside by a yearning and ability to do certain things which are not always accepted when performed by a woman, I am nonetheless pursuing the development of those areas. Although I that feel the church is slow to accept me fully, although I have delayed obtaining the education I have always desired, although I am sometimes misunderstood and criticized, I have seen someone who is important to me follow her inner urgings enough to find a life that is satisfying to her, in spite of educational and occupational deprivation.

Like my mother, I want to live at peace with myself. She is an example of living in the sunlight of ones own individuality.

**Below is an earlier draft
which I did not submit, but I like it now.
Written in 1985.**

I glimpsed tears in my mother's eyes. Only a glimpse, for the tears were seen infrequently and dashed away quickly. Never explained.

To me, my mother was the epitome of strength and energy and giving. She endured four births, one miscarriage, five major surgeries and the removal of all her teeth by the age of 35. She cared for her four pre-schoolers while encouraging her husband in his recovery from a near-fatal head-on collision. Later, when we were in school, she helped us prepare for our school functions and was always there to see us perform. Throughout my childhood, she filled several church positions.

My mother's unswerving devotion to my father's dream of a farm helped it come true. Going deeply into debt, my parents bought 160 acres in northern Texas. My father worked shifts and a lot of overtime in a factory 25 miles away. My mother kept our home life running smoothly.

That Christmas, all gifts were homemade. A tiny room served as “Santa’s Workshop.” Anyone working on a gift went into that room and knew they would not be disturbed. I remember making a picture to hang on the wall, made from colored tin foil that had been saved from I know not what, and framed with black construction paper. I helped my father create a doll house out of a wooden box divided into quarters for my little sister. Dad painted it pink; together we chose decor from a Sears Roebuck catalogue that we cut out and pasted onto the walls. For my brothers, my parents made wooden hobby horses that I helped paint. My Christmas gift was doll clothes that my mother had sewn, and a “closet” in which to hang those little pieces of clothing; it was made out of another wooden box – this one without dividers – a wire strung from end to end with plastic hangers dangling from it.

Summer mornings, mother woke us children early and herded us out to hoe the rows of peas that stretched a quarter mile, or to the milo fields where we cut the heads of grain with paring knives. On winter weekends, we picked the dry ears of corn which my father ground into cattle feed.

Mother slopped the hogs, milked the cows, caned over a thousand jars of homegrown vegetables every summer, and sewed all our clothes. She butchered chickens, sold cream and eggs, harvested peanuts and nurtured a young orchard into bearing fruit. For our birthdays, she found ways to honor us feel without an outlay of money: having a special pillow for the celebrated child to sit on for dinner, a treasure hunt which led everyone to surprises but the birthday child to the biggest one of all; a decorated homemade cake.

When my father worked on a vehicle or piece of equipment, she stood quietly beside him, handing him tools, holding a light, running errands. When the windmill needed repairing or an addition to the house was underway, or a storm cellar was being built, Mom’s “projects” (the dishes, the baking, the housework, sewing tasks) were left untended until we were in bed.

My mother said she enjoyed reading, but I rarely saw her do it. The only time she played the little guitar she brought into the marriage with her was when the family huddled inside the storm cellar, ferocious winds raging outside.

At church, she taught Sunday School, led congregational singing, and often directed the Christmas pageants. For Easter, she made each of us children new clothes, and sometimes hats for my sister and me. She attended our school functions and participated in the annual Box Supper.

I remember my mother looking tired and sad. I suspected that was a woman’s lot.

I entered marriage at the age of 20 and proceeded to be a strong servant. I participated in every project my husband undertook, standing beside him, handing him tools, holding a light, running errands, feigning interest.

We moved around a fair bit. I went wherever and whenever my husband decided to move, and I adjusted (although in one move, I lost fifteen pounds in one week – despite the fact that I was eating – and half my hair fell out due to stress). I had no goals or desires, and I hid my tears. Townspeople told my friends that I looked tired and sad. The mirror said I looked old. A heavy dark lump sat inside me, and it frightened me.

But I had to live with it. I was a woman.

A shocking thing happened when my mother was around 45 years old. At least it was shocking to me. She entered the work force. My mother took a job in a library, and she blossomed. Her love for books and people became evident.

Now, after fifteen years in libraries, many people know her and admire her. Numerous children know her as “Grandma Esther.”

I could not imagine my mother working outside the home. When I was with her, however, I sensed a happiness in her, and I saw the happiness when I observed her at her job. Her ease in relating to people, her love for children, her creativity all had outlets in that setting.

When my mother was 53, she did a very simple, down-to-earth thing that exhibited self-acceptance and strengthened my sense of security in our relationship.

My mother took a nap at my house.

My second child was a week old and my mother came over every day to bathe him and help me through the morning before going to her job in the afternoon. On this day, she urged me to lie down after lunch, as usual. I lay in bed listening to her tucking my three-year-old in for his nap. I felt troubled – so much work to do, so many demands on me.

Then my mother crawled in beside me. “I’m tired,” she said. “I’m going to snooze a little before I go to work.”

My worries dissipated. I slipped into the gentle sleep of a child who is cared for by her parents. When I woke, my mother was gone, and so was the basket full of laundry by the door. August sunlight filtered softly through the yellow curtains. My children still slept and I lay stretched out, reveling in the rare peace I felt within myself.

With hindsight, I can see that that little incident in which my mother admitted, and met, her need for rest encouraged me to face my own needs. I have walked down a long and painful road since that day. The acknowledgement of my needs has brought on a battle with my lifelong beliefs about marriage, mothering and a woman’s place in God’s kingdom.

Many of those beliefs have crumbled in the heat of my searchings, and I have had to reconstruct them. But my relationship with my mother has not wavered. Since that nap-

time six years ago, I have seen her recognize the importance of pursuing some things she needs and I have seen her exercise determination, resourcefulness and single-mindedness in going after them. Because my mother has come to a degree of accepting her needs, she is able to allow me to have needs. My struggles are not the same as hers, but she supports me in them.

Presently I am again embroiled in a search. I am facing a decision and I have strong feelings and opinions on both sides. No matter what I decide, major adjustments will be required of me and of my family. But before I decide, I am spending some time with my mother. I need to struggle this issue out, and with her I feel safe in my struggling.