

LOVE'S

ALLOWING HEALING

BETTER

IN THE EMOTIONAL WORLD

DIRECTION

WRITTEN BY

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For

My "Aggie"

and

*the many of you who have had the stamina and the courage to not be deterred,
but have mastered the skill of being comfortable with being uncomfortable for
the sake of your loved ones and for yourselves.*

“When you begin to love each other, we will discover every one of our lives is a can of worms, a skeleton in every closet. We can be willing to know up to a point, that is safe, but that’s superficial. But we must love right on through that painful area. Fragile love will love up to a point, but it’s not worth anything. But there are those who are willing to know and to be known to the point where they go crashing right on through the threshold of pain to where they know and are known.” Gilbert Tenant, Presbyterian minister, Philadelphia, 1750

An obvious instance is that of ordinary and happy marriage. A man and a woman cannot live together without having against each other a kind of everlasting joke. Each has discovered that the other is a fool, but a great fool. This largeness, this grossness and gorgeousness of folly is the thing which we all find about those with whom we are in intimate contact; and it is the one enduring basis of affection, and even of respect.

G. K. Chesterton

“No man is a hero to his valet.”

Montaigne

PROLOGUE

"In the evening of time, the only thing that will matter is love."

St. John of the Cross

"This is too good to be true!"

This was said by my mother as I sat on the side of her bed a few years before her death. She was tucked into one of the two single beds that my brother and I had grown up in. They had been made by a local craftsman in Marlinton WV from the wood of a cherry tree from the back yard of the family home that my grandfather and grandmother had built in 1904. The beds were delivered to our apartment in Charleston, WV when I was in grade school.

When my mother retired, she came home, and the beds came with her. She was in one of them now staring at the ceiling, a slight mist in her eyes. We were on the second floor of 1118 Second Avenue. She had been born in this house in 1909 on the first floor.

A few years hence she would peacefully pass away not twenty feet from where the spot where she had been delivered by one of her uncles or her aunt, all three MD's. Her youngest sister as well as my brother and sister-in-law would be at her side. In her moment of dying my wife and I both woke up in California in the middle of the night. We slept no more that night and waited for the phone call. In that warm honey colored bed, lying under comforters that she had crafted as a young woman, my mother and I had been talking. I had been telling her in a gentle and admiring tone what an extraordinary and loving mother she had been. I reminded her of all the ways in which she tended to me and my older brother and made every sacrifice for our benefit. I described scenes from our childhood that were rich in caring and always full of delicious homemade food. I talked on and on. I no longer remember all the things I said then, but it was all gospel.

As she listened, she murmured the above quote several times, "This is too good to be true." Then she said, "I don't know how I came to be so lucky, to have such two fine sons and two such wonderful daughters-in-law and three such beautiful grandchildren." I never saw tears in my mother's eyes except the night she learned of her father's death when I was thirteen, a sudden heart attack when he was seventy-six. She had a frontier back-mountain Scotts-Irish stoicism that allowed no tears, but I felt how moved she was with my words.

It is a precious and hallowed memory. I had become a healer in my mother's life.

It was not always so.

Strange as it might sound, I think you could consider my mother to have been a casualty of psychotherapy. There are no perfect parents. How could that even be? I call her a casualty because in the process of my own psychotherapeutic work, I did come to understand a great deal about my growing up that was helpful to me.

In that time, the 1970's, there was an undercurrent that ran through many therapies that parents had not only visited ills upon their children but had meant to do so. In lots of those therapies there was ample support to feel empathy for the child of your own childhood, but not so much for the parents who were often unwitting conduits of trauma that they themselves had experienced. In the Hebrew Bible, you find the apt observation from thousands of years ago, "The sins of the father are passed to the child." Please note it does not say, "The fathers intended to pass their sins, their afflictions on to their children."

In this model parents were not only instrumental in our past but were also a legitimate focus of blame. They should have known better. They were the persecutors and we, the children, were the victims. As I am writing these words now, they seem like utter nonsense.

But that does not mean it was not largely believed and subscribed to. Change didn't just mean, "Oh, I can opt for a new way of behaving, and I can find my own beliefs to live by." It was more, "I am changing because I am finding fault with what you did, and I am defying you." Oh, and "I will let you know how you failed me." If that sounds a bit brutal, well that's because it was a system that did not emphasize that parents may have been doing the best they could with what they had been given or in light of what might have happened to them. In some ways, it was a system that did not focus on either mercy or forgiveness. It was a bit more, "They did X to me, so they have Y coming to them." It was a bit more "Win-lose," than "Win-Win." In my fifty-plus years of clinical work I have encountered very few stories where parents wished to be cruel, much less enjoyed it.

In the coming pages you will hear me frequently quote one of my late colleagues, Dr. Virginia Price. She once said referring to learning healthier ways to live, "What blesses one, blesses all." Well, by that measure, my "blessings" could not have felt that way to my mother. As brilliant as she was, she was baffled by me. In particular, she had no comprehension or template to understand why I suddenly insisted on calling her by her first name, "Florence" as opposed to calling her mom. But I did just that, largely in imitation of one of my mentors whose children called her Mary as opposed to mom. Hey, I was just bringing the wonderful new world of California psychotherapy into the back hills of WV. I have some idea of the pain this new appellation may have caused her. As I said she had the stoicism that came from her stock and those hills. It did cause her embarrassment when friends and relatives asked her why I called her by her first name rather than her proper title. They were mildly scandalized. She had no answer.

But being my mom and ever adaptive to the whims of a child who had proved himself willful and challenging many times over, she began to sign all correspondence, "Florence." I wish she hadn't. But, as she said to me in an earlier scene in our lives, "I never know what to expect from you next." This exclamation had come just days following my ordination as a Presbyterian Minister. That might have been a sign I was settling down, becoming more predictable. I was scheduled to go on for further graduate school in the fall. She asked me my plans for the summer, and I announced I was going to hitchhike from our home in Charleston WV to Alaska where I had spent the previous summer. This prompted the bewildered response above.

"I'll buy you a plane ticket." "No thanks." Over the next two weeks I did hitchhike all the way to Prince Rupert, Canada where I caught the ferry across to Ketchikan. That was a great adventure, almost as grand as learning about healing over the next fifty years.

So, it was not as if I hadn't been a handful before. I have a vivid memory of one of my mom's contemporaries, a cousin taking me to task because I never wrote to her from college. And she was right. That moment also struck me as strange because my mother had obviously shared this complaint with Cousin Nancy. I had been taught not to think about my mother's emotional needs. This was that stoicism thing.

You may have noticed that I referred to my mother as brilliant. This is no exaggeration. It is entirely possible that ounce for ounce she had the most powerful, if largely untrained brain I have ever known. Remember I have worked in the heart of Silicon Valley since Moby Dick was a guppy, so I have been exposed to some pretty impressive IQs, not to mention egos.

When I finished my dissertation in 1975, I sent a copy to my mom. It is a unique volume because it is the only document that contains a complete transcript of a three-day workshop conducted by my teachers, Bob and Mary Goulding. Yes, they are the ones who had some ambivalence about being merciful toward parental figures. Because of that transcript, the dissertation is long and very thick. I call it, "The doorstep."

My mom being my mom read the entire thing. My mom also having been a proofreader for the family weekly newspaper since she was nine years old, found seven spelling errors immediately that the paid proofreader had missed. When I asked her to share her impression of my dissertation, she said simply of my teachers, "They don't much like parents." Like I said, she was brilliant.

So, what happened?

I met Meyer Friedman, MD. He taught me about my Type A Behavior which included my Free-Floating Hostility as well as my impatience expressed as Time Urgency. He and his colleagues at his institute did their best to help me rid my life of those two poisons and replace them with compassion, empathy, understanding and kindness.

In case you might think my mother was the only victim of my psychotherapeutically justified anger, consider that within two years of going to work for Dr. Friedman and subject to his benign influence, my wife said, "I think Dr. Friedman has saved our marriage." Also consider what my then eighteen-year-old son said to me one morning while we were having breakfast in a hotel coffee shop. He said, "You know I have had two dads." Oh, I replied, "Who are they?" "The dad of my childhood and the dad I have today," came his answer. I asked, "What was the dad of your childhood like?" "Easily irritated." "Oh," I said, "And your dad today?" "Easy to talk to."

If you are curious about how this transformation came about. I have a very long answer for you. The whole story and much more are contained in my first book, *Aspiring to Kindness: Transforming Male Type A Behavior*. It is over four-hundred pages of explanation and a pretty good read if I do say so myself.

If you have read this brief opening and are thinking to yourself, "Ew, a psychologist who talks about his mother. Yuk!" You have a very easy choice. Close the book at this point and go find something interesting on the TV.

If you have read this far and you are saying to yourself, “I wouldn’t mind having a ‘This is too good to be true’ moment in my own life,” read on.