

Growing Up

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Abstract

Rather than preach to the reader about the virtues of valuing education and stable two-parent homes or the harm of psychological abuse or the bad decisions that many of the poor make, I relate a story. The tradition of using illustrative stories is an ancient one, a way of educating that Jesus himself adopted—most of us are more likely to understand forgiveness through hearing The Prodigal Son than by being preached to about our shortcomings. A central lesson of creative writing instruction is, "Show. Don't tell." In this essay, I depict people and events that shaped me during my formative years in rural North Carolina.

1 Much Remained

This summer I cleaned out my parents' house in preparation for selling it. Mom died in January of this year. Throughout, the house showed signs of the 65 years that Mom lived there, beginning when she and Dad built a log cabin whose timbers still hid in the walls of the kitchen and ending long after he died. Dad constructed the cabinets from the floorboards of DC-3s salvaged from the airport where he worked as a mechanic. Connecting the cabinets, a scalloped board that he cut himself added the one decorative touch. Beneath it hung teacups on hooks above a cat cookie jar that my wife thought grotesque. Nearby leaned **The Joy of Cooking**, old and well-used. Mom, a new 19-year-old bride at the time, bought that cookbook for preparing meals for the 32-year-old whom she had met six weeks before marrying, probably the most spontaneous thing she ever did. Mom allowed no one to make a mess in that kitchen—I can remember only once when my sister, Jettie, cooked, and Mom didn't encourage her to try again. Mom wanted control—she removed nothing, changed little, added much. At the time of her death, seven clocks hung in her kitchen, including one that I gave her 16 years before with the face of my two-year-old daughter. The cabbage green of the fresh paint on the walls had scarcely varied through dozens of coats, as had little except those things worn out from everyday use—the stove, sink, and old kitchen table, the latter replaced with a nicer wood-laminate that could be extended with leaves but never was.

The table I remember from my youth had steel legs and a top that remained unseen, always covered with a plastic tablecloth, always scrubbed clear of all stains and bacteria. Mom came from the impoverished hills of North Carolina, and when she and Dad married, they couldn't afford a newspaper for years afterward, though Dad resisted Mom taking a job because women shouldn't work. Instead, Dad cut expenses (and corners) when building that log cabin for his new bride. The lack of a subfloor in the kitchen meant that in later years Mom worried about us kids making her cakes fall as they baked. That floor with no insulation chilled her every winter. Later when she could afford as much heat as she wanted, she still set the thermostat in the 60s to save heating oil. When I tried to discuss her moving, the conversation went nowhere. Nor did she—she lived there alone for 35 years after Dad died.

Dad died of leukemia my sophomore year of college. He'd had a heart attack at 42, before I was born, and he lived the rest of his life on a Mom-enforced low-fat diet. As he lay dying, the doctor came out of the intensive care unit and said to Mom, "That heart that you've worried about all these years still beats strong." After his death, Mom never dated. No other man met her expectations. Truth be told, I doubt Dad did either, but her youth when she married him and her sense of commitment to the marriage kept her from forcing her expectations upon Dad. Instead, she put those expectations on me.

From an early age, I learned to please Mom, or at least try. She valued education—I excelled in school and went on to a Ph.D. She avoided financial risk—my first car was a \$1,300 wrecked-and-rebuilt Pinto that I paid for with money I earned in the tobacco fields and drove for 13 years. She cared excessively what the neighbors thought—I won the D.A.R. Good Citizenship Award in high school. And when I fell short, she let me know it. In high school, I came home with the lowest grade on my report card a 96. She told me, "That's good, but you can bring it up." I did. Later, I told her I'd tried pot. She replied that she was sorry that she'd failed me as a mother—she should have raised me better. Years later, because we'd been late getting back to her house from my in-laws, in front of my wife and kids, she called me "pussy-whipped." Once again I'd ended up as a disappointment.

Mom applied her high standards to herself, even while entertaining guests. Most of the entertainment that I can remember took place in her kitchen at that old steel-legged table. In my memories, Dad sits drinking rot-gut whiskey or apricot brandy mixed with Pepsi over ice, a small drink every evening suggested by the doctor after Dad's heart attack. He's chatting with Mom as she cooks. No politics or religion. Casual stuff—"How was your day?" "Think it's time to plant the squash?"—with even shorter answers from Mom—"Fine." "Maybe Saturday." When visitors came for supper, Mom had the meal nearly prepared. Other than Dad's drink, my parents avoided alcohol, typical of the Baptists of the area. No drinks nor appetizers—just good food and conversation—so we always sat down to eat immediately. Because of Dad's heart, we had little deep frying, no pork, and a lot of beef from the cows we raised, such as a favorite—country-style steak. Mom browned the meat, then smothered it in mushroom gravy, made with a freshly opened can of Campbell's Cream of Mushroom soup. Mashed potatoes and mushy green beans on the side completed the main course. She often made "light rolls," a yeast roll served hot and smothered with margarine (no butter in the household). For dessert we ate pies or cake—apple pie made with sour June apples, a cinnamon-rich pie from the sweeter, late-season apples, berry pies, chocolate and coconut pies, or her speciality—black-walnut pound cake. That pound-cake recipe won a ribbon for me at the County Fair.

After the meal Dad sat around talking while Mom cleaned up. With his best friend, Bunn, Dad would swap stories of the old days—illegal stills for making liquor (sometimes long after Prohibition had ended), ancestors and people they'd known growing up, baseball (Bunn's love), and family. Regardless of the story, their love of being together telling tales showed through, something Mom's exertions made possible but also kept her from participating in. Like Martha and Mary in the Bible (Luke 10:38-42), Mom scurried around doing all the work while Dad chatted. Maybe because of Mom, it always seemed to me that Martha got treated unfairly, working while Mary sat at Jesus' feet. And then Jesus dared say, "Mary has chosen what is better." After Mom's funeral, I sat at her table with my niece, Mom's granddaughter who loved her more than anyone in the world. Like Mom and Dad, we chatted while I worked, writing thank-you notes to the many people who had done things—flowers, food, visits—to honor Mom, as Mom was helping Jesus learn to honor hard-working women who made men's lives better, learning to love and appreciate her as much as Dad did.

2 Lessons, Sometimes Inappropriate

My mom had colon cancer twice and probably again at the time of her death. After her first operation, I said to her, “They can take out part of your colon, but you’ll always be a complete asshole.” For whatever odd reason, she liked me saying it and repeated it to her friends, “You won’t believe what Dale said to me—He called me an asshole!”

Maybe I reminded her of Dad, from whom I learned to be inappropriate. Dad would see a good-looking woman in pants and say to Mom, “Hun. Look at that!”

She’d reply, “Hamp, she should wear a girdle.”

“I never liked a round one,” he responded.

Dad’s sex education lessons demonstrated similar depth. As we checked on the cows, a bull mounted a cow in heat. Dad said, “Humans do it a lot like that.” No other lessons. I still don’t understand well female plumbing.

When Dad discussed religion with me, he said, “Of course you believe in God, don’t you?” and not much more.

Such conversations with Dad were like listening to revealed truths from On High (but not Very High). Though he was the first in his family to finish high school, he didn’t read books—I saw him read only one, **Tobacco Road**, because he’d seen the movie returning from World War II and had cried because it reminded him so much of home. I thought the book was trashy and said so. “Yep, a lot like home,” he replied.

Dad’s father was an alcoholic who died of cirrhosis of the liver. When Grandpa would get drunk, he’d tell people that Dad was not his son. When Mom first started dating him, people would tell her, “Hamp’s just not like the other Easleys,” and they usually meant it as a compliment. Perhaps there are reasons why Dad was his mother’s favorite.

Grandpa had been a sort of gentleman farmer before the Great Depression hit, paying on a few hundred acres of land while overseeing the farms of others. The main cash crop was tobacco, as it was in most of the central region of North Carolina. During the year the Depression began, Dad had his own few acres of tobacco, intending to pay for his school fees and clothes for the first year of high school. At the end of the season, he sold his entire crop—picked, dried, sorted, and transported—for \$1, not worth much even in 1929.

When the Depression hit, Grandpa couldn’t make payments on the farm and was about to lose it. His oldest son, Dad’s brother James, stepped up to take care of it and pay off the mortgage. In later years, my cousins claimed Uncle James stole their birthright, though part of it, the old family home, was set aside for any family member to come back and live in. (The home was a half mile from where I grew up, but I never visited it—Uncle Carl lived there after the war, shooting at unwanted visitors.) Dad always believed it would have been lost completely if not for Uncle James.

Because Uncle James stayed home and took care of the farm, Dad was able to finish high school. After graduation, Dad worked at a factory long enough to pay for a hernia operation, a birth defect common to the males in our family, and then enlisted, serving seven years in World War II. Dad wrote many letters, some of which a cousin found 45 years later in the old family home after Uncle Carl died. Those letters inquired about the family, enclosed money, and shared the disappointment of washing out of flight school. He still got to fly during the war as a tail-gunner on a B-17, but his main training was as an

aircraft mechanic. When he returned from the war, he got a job at Piedmont Airlines, purchased three acres near Easley Road, and met Mom.

By the time Dad and Mom built the log cabin, he was sure he knew how the world worked. He'd served in the war, married Mom, institutionalized Uncle Carl (whom an alcoholic sister took back out, saying it was shameful for an Easley to be in a crazy house), dealt with an alcoholic father and sister and the suicide of a brother-in-law, the loss of a house in a card game misplayed by another brother-in-law who had three young kids at the time, and quite a bit more. Maybe he needed his certainty about the world just to survive it.

Dad's certainty was threatened by the Civil Rights Movement a decade later. A Democrat, he fell for Nixon's Southern Strategy and voted for a Republican, breaking with family tradition dating back to FDR, as many Southerners did who opposed civil rights. Dad's views on race were downright racist. Not in a mean way but more like a Hindu transplanted to the South. "I don't eat with the President of the company, and I don't expect blacks to eat with me," he said, incorporating the entire depth of his lesson for me on Civil Rights. He had a hard time thinking of an educated black man as his equal, such as Mom's boss, Principal John L. Hairston at Walnut Cove Grammar School, the black high school before integration. Plus Mom obviously admired Mr. Hairston, Dad's superior in education and polish. Dad was jealous of anyone Mom admired, so he asked her to quit work, maybe even go back to school for nursing.

No doubt the offer seriously enticed Mom, as she had always wanted to study nursing since she finished high school at 17. Her older brother, Evan, had decided she couldn't wait around a year to start nursing school when she would be old enough to enter. She'd just marry some local boy and come to nothing, so he thought. Instead, he arranged for her to go to secretarial school in Winston-Salem and to live with other girls in a boarding house, in walking distance of the school. Mom had heard of a roommate's older brother who had a car and would carry the girls places. That roommate was my Aunt Margaret. Mom used Margaret's birthday as an excuse to meet Dad, who promptly asked her out and rapidly married her.

No, despite Dad once again tempting Mom to make a radical change in her life, she decided to stay on her school job. During the month and a half that he was in the hospital, Mom continued working during the day and visiting him in the evening. And at the funeral home, friends came that Dad would never have eaten with to tell us that our grief mattered to them. And for the years afterward, they were welcome at the kitchen table and that big holiday table that Dad had built.

Mom's response to Dad's dying was to work harder and to lose her grief in staying busy. The summer after he died, she and I worked around the house, putting on a new roof, underpinning Mom's mother's trailer that showed its underside as you drove up our driveway, bricking the housing around the well that Dad hand-dug 5' in diameter and 35' deep, the bottom blasted out to 8' diameter by a bit too much dynamite that threw rocks over the rooftop. But after that summer my attachments to Walnut Cove weakened. I was off at college, smoking pot, disappointing her, and then leaving for Africa to teach math as a Baptist missionary. Jettie distanced herself and married again, then began a family of her own. But Mom's school job made her important, supported, loved, and that got her through her grief and then grew into her great love and identity.

At that school, multiple principals followed Mr. Hairston, including one who drank and left the running of the school to mom, a woman who stood up for the poor and black and disadvantaged, a nice-guy/milk-toast for whom Mom made a birthday cake every year until long after she retired, grew sick, and fought cancer multiple times, and one who was a good man and remained her friend until her death. All the principals still living came to Mom's funeral and said how much they admired her, loved her,

missed her, and were sorry for my loss. And they said that she was proud of me, and it was good to hear it from them because it was so hard for Mom to say, as if she feared unconditional love would spoil me.

By the time Mom died, having spent the first half of her adult life with Dad and the second half fiercely alone, much of her mind had already departed. As it left I went from being her Golden Boy to her Jailer in the locked unit of the Memory-Care Unit of the Assisted Living Center at which she spent her final months, probably dying from undiagnosed colon cancer. As the diplomatic reserve of a Southern Woman faded, I saw more and more that I had been right to call her an asshole, if only in jest. Acknowledging it and not pretending otherwise actually freed me up a bit to love her (and myself) a bit more without pretending too much, and without making an inappropriate joke, showing that I'd learned lessons from her as well as Dad.

3 Dad Died Well

The family doctor of Walnut Cove, NC, saw something in Dad's blood in November of the year I turned 19 and sent him straight to the hospital. Mom came to the college choir room, sticking her head in the door to beckon for me, something she would normally never do, to tell me Dad had leukemia. Until he died 45 days later, he remained at the hospital, through the Christmas holidays. In previous years, we hung our stockings on the mantle and set up the tree in the corner. On Christmas morning, Dad would go downstairs first and started a fire in the fireplace. Once the fire had knocked the chill off, Mom, Jettie, and I went down to see what Santa had brought. Dad loved watching our faces as we first caught sight of our stockings and presents.

But this year, Dad was going through chemotherapy for the second unsuccessful time when Christmas came. Despite his troubles, he had thought of Mom's wish for a wooden trunk in which to store some of her work—quilts, baskets, needlepoint, sewing. With the help of a friend, he arranged to refurbish an old wooden trunk and have it brought to a neighbor's house. From there, my future brother-in-law and I snuck it into the house on Christmas Eve while Mom was in the bath. The next morning, after we had finished unwrapping all the presents, we told Mom that there was one more for her. We brought the trunk out from in hiding under the old 4'x8' table that Dad had built from a sheet of plywood and 2"x4"s. Though she had kept dry eyes all morning, Mom broke down crying. Later when she told Dad about the morning, he kept asking questions until she admitted crying. Then he was satisfied.

During the time Dad was in the hospital, my visits with him seldom focused on his illness, perhaps only during the initial visit and when test results showed chemotherapy had failed the first time. Otherwise, Dad guided our conversations about school, how our choir's Christmas concert turned out, exams, plans for the spring semester, etc. He didn't want his illness to interfere with my education. Dad started saving from the time I was born for me to go to college. Though I have encountered people with parents who have the attitude, "If it was good enough for me, it's good enough for you," such a thought was alien to Dad. He often told me of the limits on his career advancement because of his lack of a college degree. He had come of age in the Depression, and he worked and saved and worked some more so that his family could have a better life.

Even when Dad lay in bed wasting away, I saw no evidence of despair. Instead, I saw the courage to rise above his suffering and focus instead on the people around him, including the nurses in the hospital. Soon after he entered, they were coming in to talk to him about their lives, to relate the joys such as an engagement, and to share the grief. Mom told of an incident near the end, with Dad hooked to IVs and barely able to move: A nurse came in to change his IV, and Dad reached up with his toe to tickle her butt. Nowadays that would probably generate screams of sexual harassment, but the nurse knew he was saying in his less-than-appropriate way, "You're someone that I care about."

No, Dad didn't always express himself in the ways that might meet today's standards of behavior. But what he did say, he believed, and he committed himself to. I remember watching with him a debate on 60 Minutes about a leak from a secret hearing in Congress. The debate centered on whether the nation's need to know outweighed the leaker's promise not to talk. There was no debate for my Dad. "He gave his word." End of discussion. And for marriage—Dad gave my Mom his word that he would always love her, and there was never any doubt in our household that he kept that promise. My Dad gave his word. End of discussion.

4 My Sister

After my Dad's death in January of 1980, my sister, Jettie, didn't come home for months. In May, she married for the third time, this time to an accountant, Knick, to whom she stayed married for 20 years until his death, and with whom she raised two daughters. Those 20 years were the most stable of her life.

I've never quite grasped Jettie's ups and downs. Either way, she does things in a big way. If you want a couple of oranges for a trip, she'll cut up six. Christmas presents? Load up the truck. Or she'll drop out of sight for months or years. After Mom's death, a neighbor told me about a conversation with her:

"You'll never guess who showed up at the house yesterday," said Mom.

"Who?" said the neighbor.

"Jettie," said Mom. "It's been four years since last I saw her. She showed up as if nothing happened, like she'd been by the week before."

My sister probably should never have been born into Mom's household, unless you subscribe to the Mother-Theresa view of the benefits of suffering. Jettie is an artist. Mom was a craftsman. Mom *always* colored inside the lines. Jettie drew her own lines. Mom was a poster child for OCD who sewed Jettie's clothes. Jettie would try them on before a date and toss them down. Mom would interrupt Jettie's introduction to her date to make her go back and hang things up. Mom married once and it lasted 33 years until Dad died. Jettie married three times before 27 plus was engaged to an alcoholic.

Jettie's second husband, Edward, would have been deported when his student visa expired if she had not married him. Meanwhile, her first husband stalked her, getting in fights with nearly everyone and breaking Edward's brother's nose. Meanwhile, Edward decided to bring his mother from Sierra Leone. Jettie told him she'd leave if he did. He did, and she left. After getting engaged again and then ending it, she finally went for counselling with a preacher who convinced her to get down on her knees and pray for forgiveness. She did, and soon afterward that her first husband was killed with a shotgun blast to the neck as a 50-lb bale of marijuana rested in his trunk. Then she met Knick, but that same preacher would not marry them because of Jettie's previous divorces, proving once again that God's forgiveness drastically exceeds that of humans. Fortunately, there was another preacher willing to do the job.

Jettie has a lot in common with my younger daughter, Tess, who is artistic, pretty, doesn't communicate much with us, often leaves a mess in her wake. When we took Tess with us to visit Mom, I saw more clearly how damaging Mom's constant criticism must have been to Jettie. Mom obviously favored my older daughter, Ananda, who is a lot like me. Mom was borderline-mean to Tess. Once we were driving and Mom kept picking at Tess, still a little thing in her car seat, trying to get her to do something Mom wanted. Finally, Tess said in her little voice, "Leave me 'lone."

My wife was quite proud of Tess for standing up for herself. My wife, artistic herself, created a home environment where Tess and Ananda were free to express themselves and make a mess. She arranged for her dad to build an art center in our living room in New Orleans. Glitter glue, paint, pens and crayons—anything the girls wanted to be creative. I built a stage nearby for them to put on their shows. Tess's apparently good mental health is largely a function of having a mother that loved her without constant criticism. Jettie never had that.

At the time of Mom's death Jettie had made major progress in relating to Mom. In the five months Mom was in Assisted Living, Jettie found ways of nurturing her—bringing Mom to her house to visit, taking her shopping, decorating Mom's room at Assisted Living. As mom's mind deteriorated, she became sweeter towards Jettie. When, finally, Mom lay in the casket at the front of the funeral home and Jettie and I walked up the aisle to stand in front of the body just before the service started, Jettie said to me as she stood looking down at Mom, "I've spent my whole life trying to please this woman." Now they can both rest.