

MOTHER AND ME

By Chris Ramsey

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I was four years old the first time I ran away from home. My mother had done something unforgiveable. I don't remember now what it was – perhaps she had insisted I take a nap, or maybe I was to straighten up my play area – in any case, I had had it with all of her rules. I packed my little suitcase with my favorite rag doll and all of my socks. I still enjoy having a nice variety of socks. She found me packing and asked what was up. I announced with all the authority I could muster that I was running away from home. She offered to help me pack, and she did. And then I left.

I marched out the front door, through the front gate and all the way down the dusty street to The Brazeal Mercantile (at least two blocks away, down one of the four streets in my little hamlet of Rincon). Mother probably watched me make the whole trip, but in my huff, I never looked back.

I sashayed into the Mercantile and, in my most grown-up voice, asked Mrs. Brazeal, the owner and my godmother, to charge a package of my favorite grape Cool-Aide, please. As soon as I left, Mrs. Brazeal most likely phoned my mother to confirm that I had reached my first stop. Then sitting out on the front step of the store, dipping my wetted finger into the tart powder and slowly licking it off, I contemplated my next move.

Surprisingly, my mother found me there just about the time I finished the Cool-Aide. I was quite relieved to see her, since I had not yet thought of anything to do next. We made peace and walked back home together.

As I recall, I did end up doing whatever it was that triggered the escape. My mother could be very convincing. She used reason with me, never humiliation, and never threats, and she had the patience of Job. I know this because I tried the same running-away technique twice more that summer before realizing it would never be a successful strategy.

I began to be aware of something else that summer, too; something that was reinforced over and over throughout all the rest of my time with both of my parents . . . that is, I would be loved, no matter whatever I did, whomever I became, wherever I roamed. They said those exact words to me many times and they acted upon them as well.

There's a tired old saw that says being a good parent means giving your child two lasting bequests – roots and wings. Well, like most adages, this one holds a nugget of truth. I've just explained my roots; the absolute certainty of my parents' love.

As for wings, my wise mother, the one most engaged in the everyday details of my upbringing, managed to pull that off as well. She had the advantages of time and place. I was raised in the 40's and 50's in a small town where everyone knew everyone else; where life moved slowly and simply; where dangers to the children of the village were few; where most of the villagers looked out for the children. I know those decades in our history were full of misery for many Americans, many in my small community. But for me, life was just about as idyllic as the stereotyped would have you believe.

My mother's deal with me was pretty sweet: beginning in second grade when we moved up from the hamlet of Rincon into the village of Hatch, I would be allowed to make my own decisions about where I went and with whom, what I did, when I would return . . . on one condition, and that condition could never, ever be violated. I must always inform my mother of these details first. Always!

Our system worked. I had free run of the village, but Mother always knew where I was, what I was doing, with whom I played or studied or practiced, and when I would be home, to the minute. Of course, I was pretty well-behaved or she would have stepped in and changed the rules. I knew that, too. Having safely been given my autonomy at such an early age did wonders to build my self-confidence.

Mother was also very wise at letting me learn my lessons instead of always trying to "teach" me. I learned that it's not a very good idea to attend a birthday party to which you have not been invited. I learned that it is not always okay to substitute ingredients, especially when I was to use lemon juice as a rinse for my friend's washed hair and instead used orange juice. I learned that it was unwise to ignore my mother's gentle suggestions for improvement . . . for example, not tidying up my bedroom when she remarked that it had become a bit trashy looking. Later I found out that all the home economics classes from my high school had toured our house as a field trip during their interior decorating unit. The rest of the house looked really wonderful – Mother always had a knack for that.

It took a while, but I finally learned that upon informing my mother of my plans, if she replied by asking whether I really thought that was something I should do, I needed to immediately stop and rethink the whole situation.

Only once did I ignore this valuable lesson . . . During the summer between my junior and senior years in high school, I went watermelon stealing in Mr. Resley's watermelon patch out in the south valley. I told Mother what I had planned for the evening, who all was going, about eight of us in Larry's pick up truck, and when we'd be back. She asked, "Do you really think this is something you should do?" I told her that I knew I shouldn't but that I was going anyway. I was feeling pretty grown up by then.

So I went, and I had a wonderful time! It felt good being just a little bit naughty for once. Mr. Resley's dogs gave us away. I think there must have been at least fifty and they sounded loud, huge, hungry and close! Mr. Resley fired his shotgun a time or two . . . into the air, I'm sure, but that scared the peewaddling out of me. I ruined my new tennies in the mud; I tore my favorite jeans on the barb-wired fence; but I snagged a magnificent watermelon, lugged it all the way back to the pick-up, and we made our noisy, narrow escape. What a glorious adventure!

I arrived home at the appointed time and showed off my prize to Mother and Daddy who were reading in bed. They both admired and smiled . . . cryptically I later learned, as I excitedly told them everything that had happened. Then I asked Mother what she wanted me to do with my wonderful watermelon. "Oh, just put it in the refrigerator for now."

Off I went to the kitchen. Opened the refrigerator door and there, on the bottom shelf, was the biggest, most perfect, amazing, prize-winning watermelon I had ever seen. The sinking feeling began . . . "There's a melon already here," I managed to say.

"Yes," Mother replied, "Mr. Resley brought that one in especially for your dad early this morning."

Oh, the agony of being a dirty, rotten thief! The innocent prank, the wonderful adventure, immediately morphed into a criminal enterprise. My conscience tormented me all night; I didn't sleep a wink: I called Mr. Resley first thing in the morning and fessed up. I didn't rat out my accomplices, but still it was an awful humiliation. Mr. Resley did not let me off the hook, though he probably chuckled off and on all day. I had reaffirmed a most valuable lesson.

As time moved on, the voice I heard asking "Are you sure you should do that?" became my own, one well trained by the very best.

I had become a mother myself before I acknowledged that my own beloved mother was not perfect. Her faults, few as they were, hugely disappointed me. It took quite some time, but eventually I learned to accept her whole authentic self, including that collection of nagging little character flaws. One or two even became somewhat endearing.

I know I'm like my mother in many ways and for that I am so grateful. I know that I am not like her in other ways, and for that I am also grateful. Even in the best of circumstances, this relationship with mothers sometimes gets complicated.

However, because I honestly identified some of her imperfections, I just might have avoided adopting them as my own. I hope so. Nevertheless, I do recognize that I have cultivated my own personal crop of shortcomings as a mother. However, I have observed that my children, now that they are parents themselves, thankfully have managed to avoid the most troubling offences from my list. But perhaps they have lists of their own.

And so it goes. We all do the best we can, as parents and as children. Some of us are just amazingly lucky that the Mother we chose to accompany home from the hospital was golden. Mine gave me roots; and she gave me wings; and she did it all with unlimited, unconditional love. I miss her every day.