

To Remember My Mother

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My mother died early this year. During her last years she had been ill most of the time. I think she welcomed death when it came. I think she must have decided that it was something she could do for us. For a long time she hadn't been able to do anything at all.

Momma wasn't any Molly Goldberg, but in some things she was what people call a typical Jewish mother. She had a New York accent. She also had a lot of the mannerisms, especially that obsessive interest in family and food that's associated with Jewish mothers. But my mother was very different from most, not just because she was our mother, but, I think, because she was so young when my sister and I were born. As a mother of two at eighteen, she was still young enough to want to play when she didn't have to work. We were her playmates as well as her children. Looking at my own teenage daughters, I often think how absurd it was for her to have been a parent at sixteen.

When I see how inept and ineffectual so many young people are today, I marvel at my mother's strength. She had only a grammar-school education. And she was part of a generation and of a culture where men--even those who loved their women--treated them like second-class people. I'm sure she would have understood women's liberation. But it came too late.

She had to work most of the time to survive in the days before and during the Great Depression. But not just work for a

living. She was a compulsive worker. Work was her only self-expression. Working for her children was the most satisfying expression of her love for us. And for her father, five brothers, and the teenage husband who deserted her.

But even though my sister and I grew up during the Great Depression, we never lacked food or clothes. My mother would leave her job to come home and work even harder. Everything had to be done fast. The dishes were always washed by the time we'd finished eating, which usually meant she'd bolt her own food to catch up with the rest of us.

Often she'd bring work home with her. I can remember helping her paste rhinestones into cheap costume jewelry. The whole flat smelled of banana oil. She made it fun by organizing contests. Milkshakes were our rewards. The loser only got an egg cream.

I wonder now what my mother might have accomplished if she had been educated and trained to use her many talents. When she was sixty she learned to play the piano and experimented with painting. She was a fantastic cook and did marvellous things with a crochet needle. She always read as much as she could--everything from movie magazines to novels. She could read faster than anyone I know. When I was in high school I used to test her on novels to see if she had really read the story. She never failed to capture the plot and main characters.

Women's Lib came a bit late for Momma. She needed the work she'd al-

ways done, the work of caring for her children and family. It is incredible to me how difficult it was to convince other people of that need. I think of the thousands of orphaned children in this world and cannot comprehend that we let grandmothers in their late forties and fifties go without work. Sometimes we lose sight of important things in life, especially things important in the life of others. If you have parents who enjoy work don't force them, or even encourage them to quit. Idleness and forced leisure are poor gifts. The profitable enjoyment of leisure is something one has to be trained for from an early age. That used to be--and, I think, still should be--one of the goals of education.

I have been moderately successful after many of the twisted standards of the world. I have position, authority, reputation. I have a company where people work for me and for my ideas, some with love of both, most with a dutiful interest, and probably a few in pointless awe and fear. I have resources enough to have seen to it that my mother could have done the things I wanted to see her do: to travel, to enjoy plain leisure, to give as much time as she would have needed when she was young to learn music, and drawing, and dancing. She loved to dance. One night about a year ago she heard some big band playing on TV and we danced a fast foxtrot. I'm sure she could have danced a Charleston at sixty-nine.

But she had worked too hard too long. My greatest frustration has been that I wasn't able to help her finally enjoy the things she should have. I think often I may have done her and my stepfather a real disservice by helping them financially. She had no responsibility, no reason for the work that was her best self-expression, once I could be responsible in every way for them. She was no longer needed. If she had had to work to support herself, she probably might have been happier. She might have been

healthier too. For she would have known, as she did when she was young, and working, that she couldn't afford to be sick.

I don't talk or write much about women's liberation. To me, a lot of it seems to miss the point. But my empathy for the exploited women is real and stems from my mother's life. Had she been educated, I think she might well have been among the most liberated.

I know that this has been personal, but I hope not to a degree that is embarrassing. I know that many of our readers are also my friends. They will understand that I have good reason to write this, as good a reason as I have to publicly commend a colleague. For as limited as my mother's world was, still most of her life had purpose and structure. And, as Rebecca West somewhere points out, it is not poverty, or ignorance, or calamity that wastes lives and commends our pity. It is lack of purpose and structure. And that is what, in the end, she lost.

Obviously most details of her biography, as of mine, have been omitted. I doubt that any of them would be unique. Perhaps the only one is this. Just this year a movie named "Hester Street" was released, and that is where my mother was born in 1906. She lived almost seventy years, twelve more than her own mother. But her father died when he was eighty-five. Her brothers and husbands and two sons survived her, contrary to the actuarial expectation that most women outlive their men. I'm happy to say that my stepfather of almost forty years reached his seventieth birthday recently. His love and loyal devotion as a husband were remarkable.

I find it sad--and probably characteristic of the lack of recognition we give our women--that I've forgotten till now even to mention her name. My mother was born Edith Wolf and died Mrs. Ernest Garofano.