

Community Church of Issaquah

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Life Lessons I Learned from My Mother

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May is a month filled with such a variety of memories for me. Most of those memories are good, but some just bring a cloud of sadness. Today, for instance – Mother’s Day – has been a difficult day for me over the past several years. The reason is personal but simple. My mother and my father both died during the month of May on Mother’s Day Sunday, but five years apart. I’ve tried through the years to add an element of joy to the month of May to offset the sense of loss. Sometimes that works. Sometimes not. Today, though, I’ve chosen to include in this message some memories that bring me a great deal of joy.

You would have liked my mother if you had met her. Her name was Beverly Jaquetta Aldridge Lachina. She was from a small town in Mississippi, and actually became somewhat of a mother figure to her four siblings when their own mother died when my mother, the oldest of the five, was only 14. She married at age 18 and had four children by the time she was 23 – a baby born every July for four years in a row. (I don’t think it was planned that way.) That kind of 1940’s lifestyle required her to find work so she could add to my father’s small salary and together support their large family. That’s one of my memories of my mother – working long and hard for family, something she did until just a few years before her death at age 75. Her work ethic was incredible. You should also know that my mom was a very religious woman, though that came later in her young adulthood when she began working in a church as the hostess for dinners and events. My own siblings all describe her as a ‘godly woman,’ and I think that is very accurate. She definitely was that.

But I think her comfort in life was really being a mother to her five children and later to her multitude of grandchildren. It seems to me that most of her parenting skill were instinctual and those that weren't came from trial and error. Since this message is specifically about my view of what she attempted to teach, I won't try to speak for my three sisters or my brother, each of whom has their own point of view about their relationship to Mother, and each has their own wealth of stories and lessons. I'll just speak for myself here.

My mother taught me a great deal about life, about living, and about becoming a man. Many of the lessons I have tried to put into practice, some I have failed at miserably, and others I'm still struggling with. I've chosen just a few of those to share this morning in order not to cause this service to run well beyond the time you'd like to be done and moving to the treat table for coffee and cake. Just like each of you and your own mother stories, I could go on for quite a long time, but I will spare you that and be mindful of the clock.

Where do mothers come up with things they say to their children? I don't recall there being a book filled with odd idioms from which mothers pull a quote or two and aim at their children. I have no idea where their "words of wisdom" originated, but I will admit some of these from my own mother have stuck with me for my lifetime. Here are a few of the stranger things spoken with only the authority of a parent and especially as a mother.

- Sitting at the breakfast table eating one of my mother's homemade biscuits one morning with a glass of frozen concentrate Minute Maid orange juice in front of me, I must have been drinking too slowly. From the sink where she stood, Mother turned to me and said, "You'd better drink that orange juice before the vitamins get out." I pondered that for a moment and then asked, "Where do the vitamins go when they get out, Mother?" She wasn't pleased and found no humor in my sass.

- Once when I came home from college (I was living on campus rather than at home) for a Saturday visit solely to do my laundry, Mother noticed I was wearing loafers with no socks. The truth was that all my socks were dirty and I didn't really have a choice. But in her voice of surprise, she pointed to my feet and said, "What is that? The next thing I know, you'll be smoking and drinking black coffee." To this day, I have never understood the connection between those three things. I don't get it.
- When I called her from seminary in California to tell her that I had been accepted to participate in a two-year missionary program in Kenya, she was silent for a moment then asked, "Couldn't you just stay home and get a **real** job?" Strange, I thought being a missionary **was** a real job.
- In a conversation with two other mothers at her church one Sunday when I was visiting her, the conversation turned to my being "such a good boy." I was on staff at my first church after seminary, in my 30's, and hardly considered myself a "boy." In an attempt to affirm that indeed I had turned out all right, Mother said to the women, "Yes. I consider myself doing a good job if I kept him out of jail and taught him to sleep in pajamas." She was totally embarrassed when I simply told the other women, "Well, at least I've never been in jail." If a mother's stare could have burned, I would still bear the scars today.

Mother wasn't a comedian and she didn't say these odd types of things to be funny. It was just a part of her nature to be motherly, and she was very good at that.

Those are certainly a few of the happy moments that are recorded in my brain's small data base. The real wisdom of my mother came in the life lessons she instilled not just in me, but in all her family. I'd like to share a few of those. Perhaps they are not exclusive to my mother or our family, and you may find some similarity to your own life experiences. So here goes.

The first lesson I share is based on a single word. I'm not sure but I think Mother made it up herself. The word was "stick-to-it-iveness." She often told me that I lacked that quality. I was forever starting something and not finishing it. From the simplest task to the most complex, I would sometimes begin and end well before anything should have been completed. If she told me once, she must have told me a hundred times, "You just have no stick-to-it-iveness." I've worked on that in my many years since, and still can't say that I have conquered that demon. The lesson was a simple one – commit to something and see it through to completion. Just stick to it.

The second lesson has always seemed uncomfortable to me. Mother always told us to be proud of what we've accomplished. She would often quote some weird person who said, "He who tooteth not his own horn, the same shall not be tooted." It's a bit more complicated than Mother seemed to make it. On the one hand, we all want to be recognized for our accomplishments in life, yet on the other hand we do not want to seem pompous or arrogant about it. When I was both licensed and ordained into ministry by the Baptist church of my youth, my mother was the church clerk and actually prepared and signed those documents. I clearly recall her saying, "You've done really well for yourself. It's OK to brag a little." Like most of you, I just haven't mastered the act of tooting my own horn. I'll work on that.

The third lesson was one she taught by word and by example – be generous. If there is no greater compliment for my mother, the fact that she was generous to a fault would rank highest. Though she was a woman of modest means, she never hesitated to give to someone else in need. I could tell you story after story of how she demonstrated this lesson in her own life, but the one that comes to my mind immediately has to do with two young women whom my mother took into her home when they needed a safe place to live. One Wednesday night at the family dinner at her church, she

overheard a teenaged girl saying that her mother had kicked her out of the house and she didn't have a place to go. This girl's mother has some severe mental illness issues, and their home life was at best a disaster. Mother never hesitated or blinked an eye when she told the young woman, whose name was Dawn, to get her things and come live with her. All her own children were adults and on our own, and she at last had time for herself. But Dawn needed a home and Mother gave her that. Dawn's sister, Deborah, also soon came to live there as well, and they became a part of our family. They are both married adults with children of their own now, but if you ever asked either of them, they would testify to Mother's generous heart and loving spirit. If I could claim only one of my mother's qualities, it would be generosity. I wish I were half as generous as she.

The fourth on the short list of lessons would more than likely be to treat people with respect as if each person you met were your best friend. That truth came home to roost when my mother died. In the South, it's customary to have a "viewing" the day or night before a funeral. This allows people to come and pay their respects to the deceased. Sometimes the coffin is open, sometimes not. On the night of my mother's viewing, my sisters and brother and I stood at the front of the room next to Mother's casket and greeted those who had come to say their good-byes to her. I was touched by the large number of women who came through that line and one after another said the very same thing. "I was your mother's best friend." I wondered how many best friends my mother could possibly have, until I realized that she had treated each of those women as if they were indeed her best friend and she was theirs. It was truly a tribute to her loving heart and the relationships she cherished with others.

Maybe the most important lesson, and the last one I will share, is a common one, simply this: family should be the most important thing in your life. It most definitely was to my mother. Oh, don't get me wrong. Our family was certainly not television material by

any means. There were times we were as dysfunctional as any other family. We dealt with a father who loved to drink and often spent through his wages, sometimes leaving the family in a financial bind. We lived with parents whose marriage slowly dissolved into divorce after 35 years, and perhaps should have ended sooner except for Mother's commitment to family. Trust me, there were plenty of struggles and heartaches in our family. But always, always, always Mother was the glue that held us all together. As we grew into adulthood, Mother was the one who bound us together – her children and grandchildren, too. Family was at the core of my mother's life. Even at the time of her death, her final moments were given to family. She was visiting her Aunt Juanita in Illinois, something that made some of her children quite anxious that she would be on the long road trips at her age and with some serious health issues. Nonetheless, there she was, sitting in Aunt Juanita's living room, the two of them in their nightclothes, watching TV. When stroke-like symptoms began, my mother's first reaction was to instruct her aunt to call for someone to come take care of Aunt Juanita. She then went into a coma from a double aneurism which caused her death some days later. Her last thoughts and actions were for others. That was indicative of the life she lived. Family and others always came before her. I can't say I have done the best job on this lesson, living thousands of miles away from family, and finding myself on the opposite side of issues that have divided at times us. Even so, I have come to understand my mother's passion for family, even if it remains a constant struggle for me.

When I asked my son, Josh, what lessons he learned from Mammaw (the name her grandchildren called her), he recalled the way she offered guidance to him and his cousins. By the word 'guidance,' I mean she had a way of whipping folks into place and keeping a firm hand on her grandchildren. In his own box of memories Josh has a letter from her that talked of her disappointment in his choices in life and some of his problems with bad behavior. Even today, he credits that letter with helping him

change directions in his life and become a more responsible adult. He knew without a doubt that his grandmother loved him and wanted the best for him, and I believe as his father that Mammaw would be extremely proud of the man he has become today. It was the same way with every member of her family. Our family was the center of Mother's universe and each of us were the stars that she helped shine because of her own light and faith that is reflected in us.

Let me end this love fest for Beverly Lachina with a delightful story my brother shared about a very important lesson he learned. He tells the story of once calling Mother 'stupid' and having her smack the daylights out of him. In all my misadventures, I can't say I ever experienced that lesson because trust me, I was always well-aware of the consequences of doing something like that. I might not have been the best son, but I did try to learn from my mother and pass those teachings along to my own son. In truth, every day of my life gives evidence of my desire to learn these lessons and carry on her legacy of love. My word to my Mother is simply this – "I'm working on it, Mother. Really, I am!"