

Good Times Home

My Mother, My Self

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My mom has been gone a couple of months now, but I still feel her presence in my life every day. And not just metaphorically. As we speak, my spare room is full of stuff, random bits and pieces of my mom's 89 years on this planet, souvenirs of a long, full, and exuberant life.

Back in March, when the wildflowers were popping out to dazzling effect all over Highway 46, Art Boy and I drove down to Hermosa Beach to help my brothers excavate the house Mom lived in for over 50 years. I've always joked that my mom was a packrat who never threw anything away, but even I never realized how literally true that was.

I was expecting to go through all of her stuff, and I did: clothes she wore to tatters and those that never escaped their shopping bags; a bonanza of family photos from the turn-of-the-century to the present day, mostly loose; her entire lifetime of correspondence— every single envelope marked with the date she answered the letter. I found one large drawer filled with small boxes of the necklaces, beads, and her favorite, rock pendants (malachite, lapis, turquoise, tiny geodes) that she collected over the years, lovingly wrapped in Kleenex inside their boxes. (My mom never met a packing or storage challenge that couldn't be solved with an extra layer of Kleenex.)

At the bottom of the drawer I found the ancient white leatherette musical jewelry box (now nicotine-stained to a burnished gold) that she kept on her dresser when we were kids; it played the old song, "Always" ("I'll be loving you, always"), when the lid was lifted. I remember going in there to play with Mom's vintage 1950s costume jewelry, her old USN anchor pins, and a fragile gold locket with its tiny pictures of Daddy, and my brother Mike as a toddler.

All were still inside when I opened it again. When the antique mechanism began to chug into that familiar old tune ("Not for just an hour, not for just a day, not for just a year, but always"), I cried.

But once we'd dug down through the outer strata of Mom's things, I was flabbergasted to discover my entire childhood squirreled away underneath. Mom's bedroom had once been mine, but these were things she kept over the years that I knew nothing about.

Stuffed into the bottoms of the deep drawers Daddy built into the closet, I found every painting I ever

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made in kindergarten, every Valentine and Mother's Day card I ever gave her, school reports from the 4th grade, chalk portraits of rock stars I drew as a tween, 3-ring-binder notebooks entirely covered over with my doodles and drawings. I found a paper doll with my face, so old I can't even remember playing with it. The muu-muu Mom sewed for me when I was seven, in which I won the Most Original costume award in the Hawaiian Days parade in downtown Hermosa, my Girl Scout sash with all my merit badges (minus the ones I detached years ago to decorate a canvas correspondent's shoulder bag from Banana Republic), the turquoise transistor radio from Sears I wore plugged into my ear throughout my teen years, my mom kept them all. Even though my brothers and I divided it all into conscientious piles (trash, recycle, Goodwill, family), Art Boy and I still came home with ten boxes of memorabilia.

Art Boy's mom, at 91, has decided to sell her house (of 30 years) and move into a small apartment out-of-state to be closer to family. She's sorting through a lifetime of her own correspondence, collectibles, and furniture (including many antiques that belonged to *her* parents and grandparents). It's been a chore, but she's resolved to do it now, "before I get too decrepit," she says.

Among my mom's things, I found a very poignant note she wrote to the family on the eve of a trip back to the Midwest in 1988, in case anything happened to her. She discusses the disposition of her things, and berates herself for the amount of "sheer junk!" accrued over her lifetime, which she hopes some day to straighten out. "I pray not to put my children through all this sorting and discarding," she frets.

It's okay, Mom. I relished every minute of it! Mike and Steve and I unearthed treasures, shared memories, and swapped stories. We laughed a lot! Best of all, we felt your presence, not only in the photos of you and the notes and letters you wrote, but in every piece of your clothing we wrapped up for Goodwill, every childish thing of ours you couldn't bear to throw away, every piece of jewelry so carefully wrapped up in all that disintegrating Kleenex. It felt like you were right there with us the whole time.

My only regret is that she wasn't there in person to share the experience. Yes, it would have been a chore, but if we'd all done it together, it would have been fun. I really didn't mind the "chore" part—I'm a Virgo, after all—but I'm sorry my mom missed out on the fun.

In this month of celebrating mom, flowers and candy are fine. (At least she won't be tempted to keep them forever.) But how about devoting a day to helping your mom go through some of her old stuff? You'll be amazed who and what you discover along the way. And the memory you make together will last a lifetime.

(Share memories and swap stories with lisajensen@sbcglobal.net)

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