

## Portrait of My Mother

*Always look life in the face. To know it for what it is. To love it for what it is. And then to put it away.*

Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*

My mother was a reader. I can see her clearly: I am returning home from school, walking in the living room, and there she is lying on the couch munching an apple with a book in hand. I sit down and we talk about my day at school. That was our practice every day when I returned home from school. It never occurred to me to ask her how her day had been or to inquire about what she was reading. I wish I had known enough then to have asked her.

I wonder now if it could have been the same serious literature it was by the time I left for college? Now that I have succumbed to the power of literature, I have thought more and more about her reading, when she started, what it meant to her, who she spoke with about it. I doubt it was my father who wasn't much of a reader, even though, unlike her, he was a university graduate. But I do know I "inherited" her love of books and the libraries where they are preserved.

Eventually she developed a keen interest in D.H. Lawrence. He became her obsession. She read everything that he wrote, everything that had been written about him. She loved talking with me about his life and work and why I should read him more often. And then she started collecting his works, all his works, the first editions of everything. She traveled to England a few times to try to find the editions she could not get here.

From time to time she would part with one and send it to us for a gift on a special occasion. A carefully composed letter always accompanied these gifts, as well as the countless other books that came from the "Librarian" as she came to call herself. To my daughter on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, she wrote:

*George Bernard Shaw said after reading Lady Chatterly's Lover: "All young women should be given this book on their sixteenth birthday." I want you to read this book very slowly and carefully word by word and page by page. It is the most important book written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and contrary to what many critics have said it is not pornography. It is rather a serious social document with several layers of meaning. It portrays the contrast between the privileged landowning nobility and the poorly educated laboring miners. It portrays the contrast between the natural world of the Forest (Eden) surrounded and encroached on all sides by the ugliness of the industrial city. Mellors, the games keeper is the natural man, or if you wish, the man who is happy only in an environment of nature, who is symbolic of Osiris born and re-born in the yearly cycle of the seasons. Connie the heroine is the symbol of Woman, or Isis, constantly seeking her mate who will provide her with the seed of her re-birth. Sir Clifford is the symbol of Death in Life Dis or Pluto—consuming, demanding but sterile—unable to pro-create and therefore a destroyer. As you can see this is a book that needs to be read more than once and I hope that over the years as you grow and become more experienced you will turn to this book and find more and more rewarding insights.*

Each time I read her note I have to admit to a certain astonishment. My mother was not a Lawrence scholar. She may have taken a university course on Lawrence, but to the best of my knowledge she had never written an extended commentary or paper about his work. Yet here in this note is an expression of considerable erudition, understanding, and deep appreciation of the novel. No advanced degree. No graduate dissertation. Not even an undergraduate degree. And yet who would not conclude from such a note that she was a Lawrence scholar who had all three?

In time, she developed an exceptional collection on Lawrence. One day I asked her what she was going to do with it. She replied she would will it to the Stanford University Library. It did not take me but a moment to say let's do it now. The idea appealed to her

enormously. And so together with my brother, we established the Shirley P. Katzev Book Fund at the Stanford Library that is largely, but no longer exclusively devoted to books on Lawrence. The endowment has grown, the collection is now quite extensive, and we are told it is widely used by Lawrence and other literary scholars.

My mother was born in Los Angeles in 1913 when it still seemed like a small village. She was given the name of Shirley for reasons that are unknown to me. Like her mother, Clara, who was also born in Los Angeles, she never really ventured far from there until she reached middle age. Her father, Henry, had come to this country from Poland during the great wave of Jewish migration around the turn of the century. He owned a wholesale women's handbag business and did his best to support his family during the First World War and then throughout the Depression. She never spoke to me about her life in those days, although I imagine they had their share of struggles. And like so many others who grew up in those days, she remained adverse to risky ventures, especially when it came to financial matters.

After my brother and I were born; she never seemed to want or need to work away from home. Once she spoke about a job she had at a department store in Los Angeles shortly before her marriage. But after a couple of months she quit, surely because it was so utterly tedious. She'd rather read a book than sell designer dresses to the patrons who wandered in and out during the long and boring afternoons.

My mother never graduated from college, although for a short time she did attend Mills College, then a small liberal arts women's college in the Bay Area. I am under the impression she found it difficult to be so far away from home, much the way my father did during his first year at Stanford. She put their experiences to good use as she sent my brother and me to a camp on Catalina Island for a month or two each summer. So when it became time to head off to college, we were well prepared in a way that she and my father never were.

We were a family of four—my parents, my brother and I. We lived in a modest home in what is now a rather exclusive part of West Los Angeles. At times my mother thought

about moving to a larger home. But in the end, we stayed put. Her first home meant a great deal to her and it had everything we needed--three bedrooms, patio, front and back garden, a wonderful southwest exposure in a cozy residential neighborhood. Nothing grand, mind you. But it was sufficient. Oh that my wife and I had been able to follow this path. Given our peripatetic academic lives, we have lived in as many as twenty (20) different homes in the close to 50 years of our marriage.

A friend-in-common introduced my mother and father to each other. I know nothing about their courtship or the early days of their marriage in the mid 1930s. It was always clear to me that they retained a deep love for one another throughout their years together. As my father left for work each morning he would always kiss her warmly and after dinner each night they would stand for hours it seems at the kitchen sink washing the dishes while he unfolded before her yet another day of conflict and disappointment at work.

But it was also a contentious relationship brought on by periods in which my father drank heavily and moved through alternating cycles of his furies. They fought often, at times in public, but mostly at home with my brother and I standing by helplessly. When my father became unmanageable, my mother took us to stay with her family or had my father institutionalized. It is difficult to know how these experiences affected me. I know they did nothing to diminish the love I had for either of them. But it set a model for responding to marital discord that it has taken me a very long while to overcome.

When he was well and good spirits, they often traveled together to conventions on the East Coast or arranged parties for business associates when they came to Los Angeles. And with my mother always seated in the back seat, we would travel somewhere during a school vacation—to Yosemite or the Grand Canyon or to Las Vegas where my father could gamble away his riches for a while. One year we spent a week visiting the California missions at my mother's instigation. I still have a little bell upon my desk that I purchased as a souvenir from the Carmel Mission during that trip. And in the early spring we would drive out to the orchards in Beaumont, California to pick several crates

of cherries. When we returned home, she cooked and then vacuum packed them in heavy glass jars for us to enjoy throughout the winter months.

On the weekends we would sometimes go kite-flying in Griffith Park and from the hill up above the observatory, we would put an enormous kite, built by a friend of my father, into the sky. Sometimes it reached a height where it was barely visible to us or to the crowd of onlookers who enjoyed the hillside spectacle. But she was not an outdoor person—no camping, skiing or hiking for us. Instead, she would take us to the ballet, theater or cinema. There were no soccer or basketball leagues for my brother. About all we ever did was take swimming lessons for a couple years.

But all of this ended when my father lapsed into one of his prolonged bouts of depression. These were times when we really didn't do much of anything and it is how I remember most of the years I was in high school. Throughout these periods my mother stood by him with enormous dedication until his premature death at the age of 49. She tried to help him every way she knew—she spent a fortune on psychiatrists, various treatments, and medications. She read everything she could find on the subject. And when I finally arrived home, long after his funeral, she wept uncontrollably before me for the very first time. She said she had done everything she could and she had failed.

Soon after he died, she sold our family home in Los Angeles and moved to a growing, seaside community of Isla Vista by the University of California in Santa Barbara. She had no friends there, knew very little about the area, other than the fact that she felt utterly content living by the sea where the climate was cool and moist. She had never given up on the idea of getting her BA degree and within a short time she enrolled in university. Year by year she accumulated a credit or two but she never could complete the science requirement. Even the introductory psychology course was impossibly difficult for her, as it seems to be for many devoted readers of literature and not a few professional psychologists, as well.

After living in Isla Vista a few years, her mother also left Los Angeles and bought a small home a couple of blocks away. This brought her some companionship for a while until my grandmother died after being there no more than 3 years. Her brother and sister-in-law followed in turn and also purchased a home a few blocks away and visited her as often as they could.

But fundamentally she lived alone for almost thirty years after my father died. What was it like for her to live virtually by herself all those years? Days and nights without seeing anyone. Alone in her home some distance from the city, with only a small local community nearby. After enrolling in the university she did come to know some of the professors, especially those who lived nearby. But after a while she stopped going to classes, her friends moved elsewhere, and whatever new friendships she had formed came to an end. She said she didn't mind being alone. She had her books, after all.

In 1973, almost 15 years after leaving Los Angeles, she decided to put her love of books into practice by opening a bookstore of her own. It must have been a life-long dream of hers, as it is for many devoted readers. She called the store, The Running Brook:

*Find tongues in trees,  
Books in the running brook,  
Sermons in stones and  
Good in everything  
As You Like It*

She created a warm and inviting store that was much too lavish for the community of nearby students. The bookshelves were made of handsome wood finishing, the walls were adorned with attractive paintings, and comfortable armchairs placed throughout the store. She was really far more interested in poetry readings, book discussions, and chess matches than selling books.

In a newspaper article on the store it was reported that she graced the store with her two kittens that delighted in climbing over prospective buyers. And in discussing her plans

for recycling books she is quoted as saying, “When the person is finished with the book and no longer has a use for it, he should bring it in so that others might also derive enjoyment from it.”

In time The Running Brook became too much for her to manage and while I never asked her about its financial condition, it was no doubt losing a fair amount of money. She closed the bookstore two years after it opened. I am sure it was with relief, rather than regret. She had done it, done something she had dreamed about for years, and she had done it well and beautifully and with love.

In 1979, at the age of 66, she decided to move to Portland to be closer to my family. On reflection it was a striking departure from the normal pattern of her life. She sold her home in California, packed up her furniture, and purchased a condominium on the Willamette River. It was not a wise decision. Outside of my family she had no other friends in Portland, did not have a car, and knew nothing about the city. She was totally dependent on my wife and I for her daily needs and whatever social contact she desired. But we did not live close by and both of us were preoccupied with our professional activities then. On Saturday I took her to the market and on Sunday she came to our home for dinner. Occasionally, I would go down to her condo to watch a movie or to visit for a while. But I could not do that as often as I wished. She returned to her former neighborhood by the sea in California after being in Portland less than six months.

Could we have done more? Did we do enough? Did she feel rejected by us? These questions haunt me whenever I think about them now. So do the many arguments we had once she stopped going to the university and had closed the bookstore. It was then that she retreated to her home and was essentially idle throughout the day. To be sure, she read from morning until night, but I never felt then that it was enough, that she ought to be more involved in some activity, anything, other than remaining home all day. Eventually I came to accept her choices and realized that nothing I could say would ever make the slightest difference. She would change if she wanted to and that was that. This was an important lesson for me in itself.

It was then that our relationship began to flourish, as I came to appreciate what she was reading and what she was learning from it. We would speak on the phone for at least an hour each Sunday about her reading and what I had been able to read as well, and I would write to her once a week, as I had been doing for years. These were the days long before e-mail which, had she been less technologically challenged, might have enriched our relationship even further.

When she was packing for her move to Portland, she wrote: “What shall I do with all the letters? You know I have kept every letter you have ever written to me and the thought of discarding them now is unbearable...” I have no recollection of how I replied but I do know the letters were discarded somewhere along the way, surely as a result of my failure to anticipate how much I would regret the decision. I have a scant dozen of the letters she wrote to me, as well as a few of the poems she would send us on an important occasion. To my son on his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, as she had sent to me when I turned 18, she sent one of her own:

***On Being Eighteen***

*He stands long lean and lithe*

*His hands uncallused by his side*

*The fingers bent to grasp his Fate*

*Oh Life! fling wide your gate.*

*His eyes unclouded yet by fear*

*Reflect the visions; mirror the clear*

*Unanswered questions in his mind.*

*Take him Oh Life and yet be Kind.*

*Grant him achievement if not fame*

*Let honest service be his aim*

*May thoughtful judgement be his guide*

*Respect and reason be his pride*

*Above all let him clearly see*

*The Why and wherefore of to be.*

Recently I came across a few of the letters she had written to me soon after my wife and I were married. I was in graduate school then and was uncertain if I wanted to finish. Her counsel reminded me of the cloth from which we were cut.

*My only answer now is this: finish your work as rapidly as possible and rid yourself of your incubus. Although I know and I am very much certain you know it will only be to acquire a new one. Those of us who live under the frustration of never knowing where our real happiness lies are indeed unfortunate.*

She was correct in both respects, as I eventually completed graduate school and spent the better part of my academic life in a field that I had doubts about from the beginning.

Later when I was giving some thought to leaving the college where I was teaching, she wrote:

*I have felt that you were working with you mind but without your heart—without any inner rewarding satisfaction. This, of course, can be done but it is far from the ideal.*

Again she was correct as I did withdraw from the academic fray long before it was time to retire and turned to a field that provided far more satisfaction, although one in which I remain an amateur.

In an undated letter she advised: “Don’t aim for the stars.” I find that puzzling now in light her life-long effort to encourage me in that very direction. One of her favorite literary passages, one that my grandmother placed in center of one her most beautiful needlepoint read:

*To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.*

This passage from Tennyson's *Odysseus* is framed and has always hung above the hearth of our family home. In a few years, I will pass it on to my son and his family and hope that they will come to appreciate and be guided by it as I have been.

On the night of her 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, after speaking with my brother and me earlier in the day, my mother took her life. She was by no means depressed in any clinical sense and I do not think she was seriously ill, although in a note to my brother she said her physical condition was deteriorating rapidly. I have no idea what she meant by this. Perhaps she was referring to respiratory problems, for she had been lifelong smoker and was coughing a good deal during our last visit.

I believe she had planned to put an end to her life many years before and that she had concluded whatever journey she was to take in life had come to an end. She had told me she was going to do so the last time we were together and we spoke for a while about her reasons. As I think back upon our conversation now, I recall that I really didn't believe her, nor was I aware she was planning to carry out her plan only a few months later. The magnitude of her act was not something I grasped then. I don't think I do even today.

She was alone when she died. I don't think she wanted it any other way. I know she would not have wanted to burden my brother and I, both of whom lived on opposite sides of the country, with her death or with any final coming together at her bedside. Throughout her life she shunned ceremony or calling attention to herself--a most private person, indeed.

She always thought of herself as one of the "little people" as she put it in one of her letters to me. She said the world turns for people like us and "for the daily evolving of sun and moon...and pleasure of food and love and being secure in our own little world named Family." Indeed, she always measured her life in terms of the achievements of her sons both of whom gave her a great deal of happiness even though they differed enormously in their interests and careers.

An overnight letter arrived at my home the day after she died. In it were carefully composed reasons for her act and detailed instructions on dealing with a myriad of things. She said the time is fast approaching when she would no longer be able to live alone, that she would soon be facing the prospect of living in a retirement home with “aged and ailing people who are strangers.” She said the prospect was “horrible to contemplate.”

She also spoke about how much she dreaded falling ill and not being able to choose her own future. Her beloved sister-in-law, who lived a couple of blocks away, survived for three heartbreaking years after a debilitating stroke that left her virtually unable to speak. She dreaded anything close to this and wanted to avoid at all costs falling into the hands of the medical profession. She said she was terrified at the prospect of being “kept alive merely to exist and to exist merely to pay their outrageous fees.” And then she wrote, “I intend to prevent it.”

In her letter to me she wrote:

*Life is a beautiful, wonderful even exciting experience while it can be felt and enjoyed in good health with all one's faculties. But when...it is a dull daily routine endured in pain and discomfort it should be aborted. When one is no longer a joy to oneself or of service to others then it is time to cease. I am totally unable to understand why suicide is considered a sin and a crime....*

She attributed this belief to religion that she called a “disaster” citing Philip Roth’s passage in the *Counterlife* that the belief in God exemplified “the most awesomely retarded aspect of the human mind.”

Like the death of my father, her death comes to mind each and every day of my life. As I have grown older, indeed at the time of this writing but 5 scant years from my own 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, I have come to understand her reasons. I admire her courage and hope that I will be brave enough to act similarly when the time comes.

When is it time? No one ever knows. It is always too soon. Or it is too late, too late to do anything and then the horror begins. In *Amsterdam* Ian McEwan writes:

*They could manage your descent, but they couldn't prevent it. Stay away then, monitor your own decline; then, when it was no longer possible to work, or to live with dignity, finish it yourself.*

The trick, of course, is to be able to monitor your decline. There comes a point when you can't. And then it is too late. Better to act earlier than later—a very tricky business, indeed.

When I discuss her suicide with others, I am often told that if you truly care about someone else you wouldn't take your own life knowing how it would affect them. I don't think this argument holds for the terminally ill, the people in great pain. What about my mother for whom these conditions were not present? I know my mother loved my brother and me. And yet she had nothing left to live for. She could not live her life for others. She was not one who could. She had to live it for herself and what she dreaded more than anything was reaching a point when could no longer do that. If I ask myself would she regret her action now, given the given the course of life my children have taken and their own delightful children, and the amazing times we live in? I know she would not. I know she would repeat her action, that as much as she loved her family, that love was not sufficient to keep her from avoiding a prolonged death of suffering, indignities, and anguish for all of us.

How well did I know my mother? Was there another side or sides of her that I never knew? Of course, it is impossible for me to ever find out. But unlike other individuals I have known, I do sense a real consistency in her behavior throughout her life. She was not a jungle of personalities, flighty one day, somber the next. She did not reveal a different self with one person that was much different than the one she revealed with anyone else. Nor did the pattern of her days vary much from one to the next. She was always quiet, thoughtful, questioning, listening. Sometimes she went into a funk or became angry at something I did. But that was rare and it was forgotten in moments.

Did she have a life of feeling and fantasy far removed the contemplative, caring life she displayed to me? Not to my knowledge. But then I was the observer. And I was her son, after all. What do I really know? She did like her Lawrence. Did that reflect a sexual frustration? Did she see in Lawrence all that she never experienced? Nothing in her letters than remain reveals anything like that and as far as I know she did not keep a private diary that might tell a different story. She never remarried, never had a serious relationship with anyone after my father died. Nor did I ever sense she was searching for one. Her inner life must remain a mystery, unknown, unknowable, and, I admit, remote from my thinking.

I miss my mother enormously, miss her letters and our weekly phone calls. I miss our discussions of literature, especially now that I am able to read more literary fiction. I miss visiting her home on the southern California coast and helping her in the garden or doing some of the chores that she could not do herself. And I miss just as much seeing my mother and father together and being with them as an adult. What would they be like now? Would they admire my children and my children's children? Would we enjoy one another as much as we did when were a happy family of four and a much larger family of aunts and uncles and grandparents? Such large gaps in my life; so many experiences only imagined, never realized, always longed for, yet more than enough to give me a life and keep me from falling into the abyss.

*Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,  
Before we too into the Dust descend;  
Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie,  
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer, and--sans End!*

*XXIV The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*