

May 8, 2003

You Only Get One Mother **By Kenneth A. Sprang**

Yes, Mother... I can see you are flawed. You have not hidden it. That is your greatest gift to me. ~~ Alice Walker

Last weekend, as you all know well, was Mother's Day. I always have some problem with the day. If we were to believe what we read in the Hallmark cards, hear from the lips of our clergy, and are told by Madison Avenue, we would conclude that every mother stepped out of a Norman Rockwell picture and nurtured us with boundless love, warmth, and energy as we grew from birth to adulthood.

Every card, it seems, sings the praises of a bigger than life mother, who cooked great meals, told us bedtime stories, was our refuge when our childhood world crumbled, taught us many of the skills of adulthood, and remains a steadfast and affirming parent. I have met mothers like that. I also know of mothers who at best were indifferent and neglectful of their children, and at worst were physically and emotionally abusive beyond imagination. They don't make cards for the latter kind of moms.

For those blessed with a Hallmark mother, Mother's Day is a special opportunity to say thanks. But for many others it can be a difficult day.

How does one with painful memories of growing up with Mom, or with continuing stress caused by his or her mother deal with her? Do we ignore our mothers, or is there some lesson for us even in the strains of life with a difficult mother?

I suggest we seize this post-Mother's Day time as an opportunity to do some self-reflection and to grow a little further in our life's journey. Consider the following:

- Take time to ask your mother about her own family history. What were her parents like? Her childhood? Make it your quest to discover not only *who* Mom is, but *why* Mom is.
- Give up any guilt about Mom's circumstances, and do not take responsibility for all of her emotional needs. Be caring and present, but don't try to heal a lifetime of hurts. You can't.
- Begin acting *consciously* in your relationship with your mother. Don't allow yourself to be unconsciously pulled into the conflicts of your adolescence or to otherwise repeat childhood patterns. You now have control you did not have as a child. Set your boundaries and be conscious of your own emotional power and autonomy.
- Process any residual anger. It is okay to be angry for hurts of both childhood and adulthood. It is not healthful to carry the hurts around for a lifetime. Consider short-term therapy to help you express and release the anger, accept it, and process it. Own the anger--don't let the anger own you.

May 8, 2003

- Assess how you coped with your mother as a child and how you cope now. What did you learn about coping, relationships, independence, or parenting yourself? Look inward to assess how you relate to your mother and whether you are satisfied with how you do it. You cannot change Mom, but you can change the way you relate to her.

My mother was not a Norman Rockwell mother—she still isn't. She ran off to get married at 16 and she was 17 when I was born. She was a scared, angry, naïve, and hurt young woman, and it affected her parenting. Those themes have also affected her adulthood.

For years I, too, was angry with her for things she did that hurt and for things that she did not do that hurt as well. When I finally owned and processed my anger and took time to learn about my mother's painful childhood and life's journey, I came to understand more of how her life has been shaped, and the dynamics changed. I now strive to act consciously in my relationship with her.

On Mother's Day I seize the opportunity to bring a little sunshine into the life of a woman whose life has been filled far more with shadows and thunderstorms than warmth. The change? Allowing myself to own my anger, forgive my Mom for her shortcomings, and accept and love her as she is.

For those of you with Norman Rockwell mothers, savor the time with your mother not just at Mother's Day but every day. For those whose memories are more filled with shadows, seize the opportunity to begin to make changes. In the words of 12-year old Sean, "You only get one mother. Be good to her." You'll be glad you did.

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