

Memories of My Mother

(5/29/24)

When I am asked about what I remember about Mother, things get complicated for me. The time span is limited due to the fact that she died of cancer when I was eight, and that happened a long time ago, in January 1955. She was kind and warm, and always keeping my best interests in mind. Usually when she insisted that I behave better, it was because I really needed the improvement. Of course I have many warm memories of those eight years, but they are fragmented and wispy now---like canoeing on Lake of the Isles with my dad and mother. I sat in the middle without a paddle, coasting along. Once, when Mother and I were having a disagreement (I was four), she addressed me as "little man." I thought this was a status change, a promotion of sorts, where I had been moved up in her mind to near-adult rank. It didn't take long for her to remind me that I was still just a little boy and nothing had changed at all. Big let-down. I fondly remember taking car trips with the family, vacations that led us to the Black Hills, Badlands, and Mount Rushmore, and elsewhere, while camping out with our 1951 Nash (a fastback design with a rack on top for the gear). Once while camping, when we were all in our tents (one for Mother and Dad, and another for us three boys) just bedding down for the night in the high Rockies of Colorado, I asked Mother for a drink of water. It turned out to be a big ask since the only water we had left was in the nearby creek. Mother went hiking to the creek with a cup and returned to find me nearly asleep. I was not as interested in the water at that moment. She got huffy about her effort that she had just put in, so I had a small drink after all. Robert and James volunteered to finish off the cup, so all was well.

Some recollections are action-packed. I remember my mother racing out of the backdoor of our house to come to my side as I lay in the driveway. I was six and I had just fallen out of the garage loft; my friends had rushed right away to find my mother. As she hurried towards me, I tried to push myself up, but my arms gave way and I blanked out completely. It must have been a dramatic and worrisome scene for her. I was out cold for about three days. Our dad was a doctor, and opted to keep me at home for treatment and recuperation. I was told later that I had had a concussion, but no fracture. I remember waking up in bed wearing my pajamas. Apparently waiting for me to awaken, I had some surprise visitors. My friend Dale handed me a beautiful gray model battle ship that he and his family had put together for me, and as I was admiring it, he walked out without a word (he had been told 'not to stay too long'). I was surprised, and wondered what was up as Mother told him from the doorway that he could say hi for a couple of minutes more. Dale and his brother Kent were in the loft when I pitched out into the air and landed on my head on the cement. I had been trying to lift my scooter up to the loft from the driveway with a rope, but it had caught in the doorway below. Of course, I leaned out a bit to free it up. Bad move. I was out of second grade at Douglas school for about a month.

And I may have recounted the following incident in another spot in my writings. The summer after we moved to Minneapolis from Deep River, Ontario, our family took a trip back to our old home town for a few of days to say hello again to old friends. I had just turned four. I gather that my older brothers were along on the trip too, but not anywhere nearby during the accident that happened just about a block from our old house. I witnessed the tragic moment when a car trailer was turned loose in front of a house. It was a two-wheeled open trailer sitting by itself, not hooked to anything. I watched and worried as a couple of bigger boys (among the crowd of kids hanging around) thought it would be fun to lift the metal hitch tongue off the ground. I thought this was unwise, and knocked on the house door to warn

the adults. They invited me in—a neighbor man was talking cheerfully with the housewife. And as I was explaining about the trailer, to everyone’s surprise, outside the window the trailer suddenly started to move! The man dashed out the door, but the trailer rolled free and coasted down into a gully beside the road, running over a toddler who just happened to be in the way. I remember well the child’s mother racing out of her house from across the street to her side, screaming the whole way. The little girl in a white play dress was lying very still and not making any sound. An ambulance was called, but it was too late. My mother was very upset when she heard about it 15 minutes after the fact. I was the accidental witness to this event only because Mother went to talk with an old neighbor for a few minutes; I was permitted to wander down the block a little. Of course, she probably was thinking afterward how easily it could have been me who had gotten caught under that wheel, or any of the kids hanging around the street corner at the time (about 7 others).

I also already wrote about the time that Mother and I (as a three-year-old) were out in our motor boat on the Ottawa River with Dad, who was giving a ride to Mother, me and a neighbor lady. We three riders sat in the back while Dad was at the front of the boat, driving, and noticed nothing about the crazy spill I almost instigated. I was rescued at the last moment by Mother and her friend when I decided the surface of the river looked solid enough to check out. “But I wanted to walk on the water!” I protested. I must have had a very early Jesus complex. A vivid visual memory I still carry is the sight of the smooth water moving by right in front of my eyes (less than a foot over the surface), with Mother wrestling me with all her strength back into the boat with the help of the other woman. Close call! This story would never have been written without her heroic *save*. Mother and I were dropped off on the shore after that, while the other lady got a little longer ride. Mother was obviously relieved, but she looked at me differently for a while after that, and her fingers were trembling. I told her I was sorry.

Mother was a music-lover and was able to play piano and the violin very respectably. I was surrounded by music as I was growing up. I looked up to my mother for her musical skill, and I also admired my older sister Betty (14 years my senior), who had learned to play piano quite well by the time she reached college age. Mother always believed that I had some natural musical talent, which I must have hinted at when I was young. I liked messing around on the piano, and I enjoyed listening to the old classical 78s on the record player we brought from our old home in Canada. I remember one time Mother brought me along on a visit to a friend’s house not far from our place on Humboldt Ave in the Kenwood neighborhood. My older brothers were probably left to fend for themselves at home, or perhaps they were at school because this memory involved a regular morning program on television. I had taken a shine to the theme song the TV always played at the beginning and the end of a particular half hour broadcast -- some sort of variety talk show. I remember well paying attention to the TV wherever I went, since we did not have one at home yet. TVs were expensive and we did not have much discretionary income at the time. I learned much later that the tune I liked so much, which the show borrowed for their open and close segments, was called the *theme from Moulin Rouge*, a famous movie of the time. It seemed poignant to me to hear that minor chord right after the beginning of the song. (For musicians, it was/is the ‘three’ chord, such as e-minor in the key of C, that *sent* me so much.) And this was when I was still too young to go to kindergarten.

I took piano lessons briefly when I was six. My mother wanted to give me the opportunity to start piano early in life. For about six months, I took piano from a middle-aged lady at MacPhail Center for Music downtown. I was not the best or most cooperative student. I wanted to do things my way, which usually meant *wrong*. I made trouble for Mother by not wanting to go very much, and by not listening to the

teacher's guidance, basically ever. To Mother's disappointment, we discontinued lessons too soon for me to get anywhere. For a couple months after that I was sent to a private teacher who had a nice grand piano in her apartment on Hennepin Avenue, just a couple of blocks from Douglas School. I went there after school once a week. That did not turn out very well either, due to my lack of discipline. The lady was nice and she played impressively well on her grand, I remember, but I just did not think of this as something valuable for me. Wrong. I should have stuck with it, for sure. Mother was hugely discouraged about my attitude. Sorry, Mother, I was foolish and contrary then.

I managed to learn a lot about music on my own after that. And when I got to 7th grade, I started learning to play the trumpet in the band. I took to it like a fish to water. By the time I graduated from high school I was quite an accomplished player. Once I got to the university, though, I found that I was surprisingly behind other players my age; I got discouraged about it, and never studied or played trumpet after that. While learning the trumpet I was able to absorb enough of the basics of music to teach myself about how to play the piano. Over time, I had worked through many of the piano books around the house. And once, when I was about 14, as I glanced through some intermediate piano music, I came across a written message from the past: a prediction about me from my mother. She had written in pencil in the music's margin, "Warren will reach this level by age 11." I was surprised to see it. She clearly had high hopes for me, as I mentioned. I feel terrible I disappointed her so much. But my interest in music was natural and undeniable. I *did* reach that level of piano playing skill after all, just a little late, and on my own. I went on from there, and when I reached the University of Minnesota (the full-credit-load tuition cost was \$110 per quarter then), I finally studied the piano the way I should have back in childhood. I was able to correct some ingrained errors in technique, and learned to read fairly difficult music. I also studied music in classes from many angles, especially composition, orchestration, advanced harmony etc. And since then, beyond college, I have enjoyed some very modest success as a composer out in the real world. Also, at age 24, I founded a music school of my own, utilizing as faculty members many performer friends I knew. *The West Bank School of Music* had a run of 47 years! And Mother must have been surprised to see (over-lapping with the music school) that I spent over 50 years as a professional piano tuner/tech. Thus, ultimately I did make my way in music, and if Mother is still up there watching me she likely is quite pleased after all.

When I was eight, I remember vividly a very special event in my life that involved music and my mother. I had attended an occasional concert in the park where classical musicians performed, and I remember going to the Lake Harriet Bandshell for an orchestral concert. And for a two-week period when I was little, I stayed with family friends (while my own family went to Mexico without me, dammit), whose dad was member of the violin section of the Minneapolis Symphony Orchestra. I recall how impressed I was when Mr. Jackson, in his black dress tail coat, would run through rapid warm-up scales before going off to work on Friday nights. He was smooth as silk on that rich-sounding instrument. But I have no recollection of hearing a performance *inside* a concert hall before this.

On this special occasion, for some reason (perhaps the cost of the ticket) Dad was not along. Mother, my two older brothers and I were able to attend an actual, live one-hour-long opera at Northrup Auditorium at the University of Minnesota. This was a cavernous building, with maybe as many as 5000 seats, and it was an experience just to look around at the ornate decor. The opera had recently been written for an all-ages audience, but especially for kids, originally for an early television broadcast. This was an amazing thing for me. There was a full orchestra just like at the Lake Harriet concert, and there were vocalists in costumes singing a whole story right there, live on stage. I had heard singers on the record player lots of

times but never anything like *this*. The opera was written by a famous modern composer named Menotti and the opera was called *Amahl and the Night Visitors*. This opera continues to be a popular at Christmastime even today. It tells the story of the *Three Kings*, traveling from far away, looking for a very special child they had gotten signs about in their dreams, following a huge star in the sky. They were near Bethlehem when they decided to stop off somewhere for the night. They chanced upon a small, simple hut where some shepherds lived, a poor widow and her young son, Amahl, about ten.

It is a sweet story, full of life and interesting touches to appeal to children, such as when one of the Kings, Casper, is talking one-on-one with Amahl about what's in this box that the king always travels with. The top two drawers contain lots of intriguing items like magic stones and fancy, colorful beads, but in the third and final drawer, after teasing Amahl, Casper pulls out licorice to share with him.

One of the most beautiful songs in the opera takes place after Amahl has been sent off by his mom to gather some of the local villagers. Amahl's mother asks the kings what they are trying to find in their travels, and they explain (in the song "*Have You Seen a Child?*") that they are searching for a very special and magical child they have heard about. The three kings try to describe this child to her, and after while she responds that she *does* know a child that special, her own son. It is a moment when all the mothers in the audience, including mine, feel an amazing chord struck (almost literally) that reminds each of them of the strong and unbreakable bond they have with their own children. In many cases, those children are sitting right with them. The kings sing on, while Amahl's mother is singing to them at the same time, almost introspectively, about Amahl. They blend in perfect harmony.

My brothers Robert and James were sitting right in front of us a row ahead, while Mother and I sat side-by-side behind them. I noticed that this song had a peculiar effect on her. With tears in her eyes, she was studying my brothers carefully, and then me, thinking deeply about us, while resonating with the song about how special each of her three boys was to her. I put my hand on top of hers, and that might have comforted her a little because she gave my hand a squeeze. I realize now what I did not know then, that a whole, wide, added layer of poignancy was in play here. She knew that her days were numbered, and that she was facing, helplessly, that already-approaching cliff that she would never be able to avoid. She must have been reminded at that moment that she would never see how her sons would grow up to be productive adults in society, who in their own ways would be doing good in the world. As the youngest, I was the only one who did not know she was dying. I knew she was sick. I could tell she was in pain when she had to bend over in the middle as she pivoted between the kitchen sink and the table where we were eating. I knew she was in trouble, but I could not imagine that she would never be there anymore.

When I woke up that fateful morning in late January 1955, less than a month after the Amahl performance, I could tell people had already been up a while. Mother had gone to the hospital again in the middle of the night. A couple times in the past, she had been admitted to Northwestern Hospital (where our niece Linda was born in 1953), but she had always returned home, somewhat improved. This time, she never returned. My brothers already knew about this news and had gone back to bed, as I recall. Dad was already back in bed too, and that is where he invited me to join him to impart the terrible news. "Your mother died last night." I couldn't believe it. I was not prepared for this at all.

Then followed a lot of crying by everyone, a reviewal at the funeral home, lots of people dressed up nicely, everybody looking despondent and heart-broken, my mother looking quite normal in the casket. And serene, but no longer with us. Then there was a memorial service in the smaller chapel at Hennepin Avenue Methodist Church, with many friends of my parents giving us three boys hugs. Sister Betty with

her husband Murray and little Linda, whom I had helped teach how to ride her tricycle, were there too. Soon after that, some of the older generation traveled to Canada with the casket. She was buried in the family plot in the Tillsonburg, Ontario cemetery. I was able to save a few souvenirs of Mother's which I still have here at home.

A complete change of life then ensued for me. First, that summer, after I turned nine, we boys spent a month each staying with two of Mother's siblings, first on the farm with Uncle Etheridge and his family near Oak Bank, Manitoba, then with Aunt Alice and her family in a Winnipeg suburb. When we returned home from Canada we were presented with the news that Dad was soon to remarry! A woman physician colleague he worked with at the Minneapolis Public Health Department was to be the new family member. And this began the 45-year period in my life where my step-mother, Evelyn, was a constant presence. She was utterly and completely a different person from my mother, which led to some difficulties, and some times of comfortable stasis and cooperation. That's another whole story.

I think of my mother often. I can only assume that some very deep, priceless spirit has been instilled in me through her sincere, skillful nurturing when I was small. Her care and her limitless love still abide within me. I am very grateful for those eight years in her sheltering arms. Now, thankfully, the sheltering arms of my wife of 50 years (and counting) serve me wonderfully well.

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