

## LIFE LESSONS

### Lessons from my Mother

My mother instilled a love of books in me early in life. I'm sure it started as a way to keep a two-year-old quiet and occupied. We would sit on the couch, and Mom would read, her finger pointing out the words. She would sound out letters and have me repeat them while we examined the pictures.

I memorized the stories and would "read" them out loud. By the time I entered kindergarten, I was reading books at the first and second-grade levels. I mimicked my mother's speaking patterns. She would raise or lower her voice to indicate a question, emphasize emotions, or show a different character. She acted out the parts to create interest in the story and gave me a safe place to do the same.

When my sister was born, I was almost three. I wasn't sure about being a big sister. When my grandparents came to see the new baby, my mom asked me to read to my Grandpa. He was surprised when I started reading *Go Dog, Go!* by Dr. Seuss.

He chuckled at the pictures of green dogs driving blue cars and red cars under yellow trees. When I came to the last few pages, tears ran down his face from laughter. I enthusiastically read about dogs and cars of all colors going to the tree for a big dog party.

My pronunciation was a little off. My Grandpa heard me say big dogs and little dogs were all going to the tree for a big dog POTTY. My feelings were hurt as he laughed and took his glasses off to wipe tears from his eyes. Mom said he wasn't laughing at me. He just enjoyed how I told the story.

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Growing up with three siblings, we had inevitable clashes. Alliances might form between the oldest and the youngest or the ones born under the sign of Pisces against the ones born under Libra. No matter how we paired up, we eventually heard, "Stop fighting!" So, in elementary school, when a bully started picking on me, I didn't fight back.

My attitude toward going to school changed, and my Mother noticed. She asked what was going on. Why didn't I want to go to school any longer? I told her a girl pushed everybody in line at the end of recess, and she seemed to pick on me quite often. To my surprise, my Mother said, "Why are you letting her pick on you?" I looked at her and said, "Because you said not to fight."

Mother shook her head and said, "We don't start fights, but we don't become doormats either. You don't let someone take advantage of you. Next time you're in that situation, give them a verbal warning. Tell them, 'Stop that, or I'll knock you flat.' And then do it!" I couldn't believe she was giving me permission to fight! I could hardly wait for school.

The next day at recess, just as anticipated, the bully cut in line behind me. When others protested, she lied and said I gave her back cuts, making me the target of classmates' ire. I knew what was coming. She would start pushing, and I would fall against the person in front of me. They would be mad, and I would be the one blamed. I braced myself, and sure enough, she pushed. I turned around, looked at her, and said, "Stop pushing me!" Then I turned back around. Darn! In my eagerness to fight, I forgot to warn her. I was going to have to let her push me again.

Push me, she did, with a little more force this time. I was shoved into the person in front of me. Again, I turned around and, in a louder voice, said, "Stop pushing me, or I'll knock you flat." Kids in line on either side of us, in front of me and behind her, suddenly focused on our interaction. All the talking stopped, and we became the main attraction.

I stood with my legs braced, head up, eyes forward, anticipation humming in every pore. I felt her lean back to shove me again. Just as her hands touched my back, I swung my right arm up

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and back. My elbow made direct contact with her nose. Blood spurted and she screamed in surprise and pain. She lay crying on the pavement, holding her nose. Teachers came running and asked, "Who did this?" Twenty fingers pointed at me. One teacher asked my name. I told her and added, "My mother told me to." She looked at me funny and said, "Go to the principal's office."

I didn't know where the office was, having never been in trouble at school. Again, I was given a funny look and told it was next to the nurse's office, past the library. Off I went, leaving classmates buzzing about the fight while teachers tried to stem my nemesis' flow of blood and tears.

When I arrived at the office, no one was at the front desk, so I sat on the couch and waited. Crying and loud voices came up the hall as teachers brought the bully to the nurse's office. The principal came out to see the cause of all the commotion, giving me a quizzical look as he passed. I heard his surprised voice when he learned what had transpired on the playground. Returning to his office, he asked what I was doing there. I raised my chin, looked him in the eye, and said in a voice full of authority, "My Mother told me to warn her once, then knock her flat. So I did." He shook his head and sent me back to class.

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I was given opportunities to learn responsibility, and like most firstborns, I took them very seriously. One early memory is from second grade. My sister had a doctor's appointment that wouldn't be over before I got home from school.

My Mother gave me a key to the front door and had me practice unlocking and locking it. Before I left for school, she took an extra-large safety pin and pinned the key to the hem of my dress so I wouldn't lose it. All day long, I checked the inside of the hem to make sure the key was still secure. My fear of losing the key was second to my fear that my Mom would be home and I wouldn't be able to use it!

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

I was at the front door, trying to open the safety pin, when I heard the phone ring. My Mom had said she would call and make sure I made it home. I panicked, trying to open the door to answer the phone. I gave up trying to open the safety pin and inserted the key in the lock. Since it was still attached to my dress, I had to stand on my toes to reach the lock. I twisted the key, and the door opened, but I couldn't get the key out of the lock. I dangled from the doorknob, trying to remove the key.

The phone stopped ringing. Without the anxiety of the ringing phone, I got the safety pin open and removed the key from the pin. I was now free from the doorknob and was trying to get the key from the lock when the phone rang again. I answered, and a strange man asked if my Mother was home. I told him she was in the shower. The man laughed and said he was my Uncle Art from Alaska. When my Mom got home to tell her he called, then he hung up.

My mind was in turmoil. I didn't have an Uncle Art. I had three Uncles, and not one was called Art. No one in our family had ever lived in Alaska. That man was a liar, and what was worse, he knew I was alone! I shut and locked the door, then sat with my back against it, hiding from view.

When my Mom arrived, she couldn't get inside. I had her key and had locked the door. I was so relieved to hear her call my name. I told her about the strange man who pretended to be my Uncle and how he knew she wasn't home. She laughed and said he was HER Uncle from Alaska. When she was little, he was the one who told her to say her parents were in the shower if she was home alone.

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Through the years, I learned many things from my Mother: how to cook, plant flowers, draw, be polite, treat others with respect, use my imagination, do my best but try a little harder, and so much more.

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The latest lesson she's teaching me is acceptance. Her memory is failing. She doesn't always know who I am. Words are lost or mixed up. She is confined to a wheelchair and needs assistance with almost everything. Yet she smiles at jokes, fiercely holds our hands, doesn't complain about her circumstances, and has snippets of lucid conversation with people who visit. She lets us trim her hair and nails, give her a hug and will kiss us good-bye if we ask.

I miss the Mom I had. I am thankful for all she taught me. I love this version of my Mother just as much. She is teaching me to be grateful for what we had in the past and the present, to accept with grace and humor the ups and downs of life, and to continue to bestow kindness and love to others.

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#### Lessons from my Grandpa

My Grandpa was a carpenter. He had a two-car garage behind the house that contained his workshop. The front of the garage had large windows for natural light. Children were not allowed into this garage, especially if he was working. We would walk along the top of a stone wall beside the garage and watch him work. Every so often, he would look up and wave at us.

He would bring us scrap pieces of wood and sandpaper to use. The flat, round pieces were our favorite. They were our "coins," which we used to purchase "homemade pies." The pies were old tin foil pans we covered in dirt, leaves, flower petals, and acorns from the yard.

One day, while my siblings and cousins were occupied elsewhere, my Grandpa came out of the garage and invited me inside. At the doorway, he told me not to touch any tools unless they were specifically given to me. I couldn't believe my luck. I was entering sacred ground, and it sounded like I might get to use tools!

I was led to the far wall, where a huge peg board held an array of saws, hammers, wrenches, pliers, and other tools. Grandpa handed me a pair of needle nose pliers with red handles. Then he

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

said we were going to find the perfect hammer for me. He handed me an eight-pound hammer. I don't remember what he asked me to do with it, but it was rejected. A twelve-pound hammer was tested and deemed to be the perfect weight for me.

Armed with a hammer and a pair of pliers, I was led to the workbench. Grandpa gave me a board and a small plastic bucket of nails. He told me he was looking for an assistant who could hammer a nail flush in three strokes without leaving a hammer mark on the wood. He told me you could always tell a carpenter by their hands. He stretched his hands out in front of me. "A carpenter's thumb will almost always be flatter than the other fingers. And the first finger of one hand will usually be shorter than the first finger of the other hand."

I was fascinated and looked at my hands to see if it predicted a career as a carpenter. My face fell. Grandpa laughed. "If I teach you right, you'll be a better carpenter without the telltale fingers." He explained that the flat thumb came from being hit with a hammer. The short finger was caused by cutting off part of the tip with a table saw. My eyes widened as I decided carpentry might not be my career choice after all. Grandpa said I wouldn't have to worry about either of those things. I wouldn't be working with the table saw for many years, so my finger was safe. Using pliers to hold the nail would keep my thumb out of danger.

He then demonstrated how to grip the nail in the pliers. "The first blow is to set the nail into the wood using the pliers to hold it straight. The second blow, without the pliers, is to drive it almost all the way into the wood. The third blow is to make the nail flush to the wood. Just not so hard that there is an indent from the hammer," he explained. I would be declared his assistant when I could hammer five nails in a row with only three blows each and no telltale mark.

I spent the rest of the afternoon hammering nails. To this day, I count three blows per nail and examine the wood for hammer marks. I know I'm not yet assistant material when I exceed three blows. Thanks to a good pair of needle-nose pliers, I have yet to sport a flat thumb.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

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Grandpa said he had a game to teach me when I was in first grade. He held my wrist and showed me how to twist my arm to escape his grip. He said I could use it if I didn't like an eventual boyfriend holding my hand. I learned I could get loose even when my Grandpa tried to keep a grip on me. I thought it was like a magic trick to be able to escape!

Every time we were together, he would have me practice by holding my arm. I would flick and turn as he taught me and get free. The movement became second nature to me, so much so I didn't need to think. I just reacted.

One day, years later, a male friend grabbed my arm to keep me from being trampled by a passing crowd. I flicked my wrist and was out of his grasp before I realized he had hold of me. We were both surprised!

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#### Lessons from my Father

My Dad taught me to be resilient and to try new things. He built a model airplane in the basement. Wing tip to wing tip, the plane measured almost three feet across. It had a balsa wood and wireframe, bright orange and brown wings, a small motor, and a long tether from the motor to the control box.

The whole family went to the park for the plane's maiden flight. We cheered as it took off. Dad guided the buzzing plane higher, making circles, but had no throttle control, so it flew faster than he expected. A stream of smoke followed the plane from the mix of oil and gas, which lubricated the cylinder. Dad struggled to keep the plane flying in a circle without the benefit of modulating the speed.

Somewhere during the flight, a wheel came off. We saw it fall from the plane. Without a way to modulate the speed, landing with only one wheel meant a crash landing was inevitable. Dad

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

tried to land the plane before it ran out of fuel and dropped like a rock. He managed to get the plane down, though he couldn't slow the descent. The plane continued its circular motion, only now, with one wheel missing it wobbled, tearing up grass, before finally flipping.

Dad said we would have to find the wheel. But we didn't remember exactly where it fell. My siblings, Mother, and I started looking in the grass and weeds roughly along the entire circular path the plane had taken. Surprise of surprises, I found the wheel!

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Dad's obsession with flying progressed. He went from flying a model airplane to learning to pilot a plane. He managed to take two or three lessons before my Mom stopped them. She said she was not inclined to raise four children on her own, so he pivoted to a different activity, building a car.

One night, he came home in a Volkswagen Beetle and parked it in the backyard. After supper, he removed the body from the chassis. The next night, he removed the seats. A moving van dropped off the bright, sparkling yellow fiberglass body of a Bradley GT. Two green-tinted, "L"-shaped doors were placed in the garage, along with several boxes containing fabric, cables, and car parts.

Eventually, Dad called us outside to help lift and place the fiberglass body onto the VW chassis. We held it steady while he bolted it on the frame. The Volkswagen was transformed into a spiffy, yellow sports car with white leather bucket seats and Lamborghini doors. I was excited! I was almost old enough to get a learner's permit. I could see myself driving this car to school. Heads would turn, and I would be popular!

I was right. Heads did turn when the car was driven around town. People gathered around to admire and ask questions while it was parked at the library. But it was never me driving. Sitting

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

in the passenger seat, I was invisible! I was jealous of the car. Years later, my Dad sold the Bradley to a high school student. I never did get to drive it.

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We had a palm tree outside our kitchen window. It wasn't very tall, but it did produce a single coconut. Dad stood on a step ladder and hacked it down. He chopped the smooth, hard, yellow-green outer shell off to reveal the hairy shell I recognized as a coconut. While Mom prepared dinner around him, he drilled several holes in the coconut and shook it over a glass to catch the milk. Dad managed to capture about two inches of liquid in a small jelly jar.

He grinned from ear to ear as he presented us with the glass. None of us were entirely impressed. Dad declared we would all get to taste fresh coconut milk and handed me the glass. It resembled diluted skim milk, with brown coconut hairs floating in it. I did not want to taste it. Dad insisted we expand our experiences and try something new. I took a tiny sip, wiped a coconut hair off my tongue, and handed it to my sister.

She promptly gave it to another sister without tasting it. This sister also refused and moved the glass in front of our brother. Dad was busy cutting the coconut in half to toast the meat in the oven. He was ignorant of his three youngest, who were missing the experience of fresh coconut milk.

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In anticipation of a camping trip to Colorado, my Dad bought a six-person tent. Camping in a tent would save us money on hotel bills during our vacation.

He unpacked the tent in our backyard and started hammering posts, tying ropes, and setting the center pole up while telling us to get out of the way. Several hours later, the tent was up, only to be dismantled and rolled into the storage case. Dad told us we were all going to help set up the

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

tent when camping. For the next several nights, we would practice putting the tent up in the backyard.

We arrived at a campsite in the late afternoon. A camper was parked in the space next to us. The couple waved as we all climbed out of the van and started unloading.

The ground was rockier than our backyard, so setting the pins took longer. My mom was busy putting air in mattresses for us to sleep on. The siblings were told to find sleeping bags or fix sandwiches for a quick dinner. It was almost dark when the tent was ready. We stood looking over the gorge, just past our tent, at the sunset before being told to get to bed.

Sometime during the night, the wind picked up. It came up over the gorge and collided with our tent, shaking the sides. A picket was wrenched loose, and one side of the tent ripped. Dad tried to collapse the tent and prevent further rips as Mom shooed us into the van. She piled the bedding and air mattresses on top of us and told us to deflate them and stay in the vehicle.

She ran to the tent as a gust of wind dragged it, with Dad trapped inside, to the edge of the gorge. She held the door flap open so he could crawl out. Together, they managed to partially dismantle the tent enough to stop it from becoming airborne. After anchoring it in place, torn and flattened, they climbed into the van to try and sleep. The following day, the camper family said it wasn't as breezy as previous nights. We spent the rest of the vacation sleeping in hotels.

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#### Lessons from Life Experiences

I learned I can't control everything but can control how I respond to situations. For example, my office caught fire overnight. I saw it on the morning news and rushed downtown to see if I could salvage anything. Firemen, hoses, and flames met my gaze. I wouldn't be allowed in the office for a long time.

### 3<sup>rd</sup> Place: Life Lessons by T.G. Gilliam

As I was watching the fire, a reporter contacted me. Some of the questions they asked were: Did I know the cause of the fire? No. How long had I been a tenant? Five years. What were my plans? Find another office space.

A client read the article and contacted me. They said they were impressed by my attitude. I didn't see anything to be impressed about. I no longer had an office. A new office was at the top of my to-do list if I wanted to keep working. I was upset my office and all my equipment were gone, but they could be replaced. No one was hurt in the fire. I was given unplanned time off. It was time to move on.

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Jumping tandem out of a plane wasn't as scary as I imagined. I was strapped to someone who had experience and confidence. The hard part was not being in charge. I was, as my husband said, the Queen of Control.

Once we stepped out of the plane, there would be no turning back. Surprisingly, I didn't feel the descent. It felt as though we were stationary. The wind muffled any sound, but I couldn't hear the roar. My jumpsuit, skin on my hands and face were pushed back in ripples. Pictures from the GoPro showed us tumbling upside down, and my cheeks flapping as though a tremendous hair dryer was aimed at my face. I looked like a dog with their head out of the car window, tongue and ears flapping, but magnified tenfold.

I did feel the exhilaration of snapping upward when the parachute opened. That was followed by the stillness of hanging in space. It was a feeling of just existing, nothing more. The quiet was deeper without the wind. My body felt lighter, as though by falling, I had no cares, worries, or thoughts to weigh me down. I can still recall that sensation when I remember the jump. It was a leap of faith into the unknown, and of discovery. A leap to a new me.