



Barbara Kwan

Gifts My Mother Gave Me

The first lessons in life are the most long-remembered.

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I can remember winter mornings before there were words, when I awoke to a backyard transformed into a foreign landscape under drifts of fresh snow, the branches of the elms hanging low with ice. The world was never so quiet as on those mornings; even the squirrels looked surprised.

The next thing I remember is the first purple crocus suddenly appearing in the snow outside the kitchen window. It

was a message that spring was coming.

I remember how the earth looked as the last snow melted; the smell of Lily of the Valley; the snowball bushes luminous on spring nights. As I watched my mother cross-pollinate roses with a clean paint brush, I learned about the ministrations of the bees, who in their rush for pollen leave dusty footprints behind.

I remember tasting colors before I

knew their names: pink, lilac, cerulean blue.

I remember feeling sculpture before I learned to look at it. On my first visit to a museum, I ran up to the bust of a young boy and ran my hands along its contours. My mother and a museum guard watched and smiled, because they understood it was a child's way of learning the language of space.

Then there were words, and my first book, which my mother wrote and illustrated, about an elf-man who lived in a grand piano and emerged to perform small feats of magic. The performer of magic, of course, was my mother, my

first and finest teacher. She showed me how to be still: to see, to hear, and to feel the magic animus in every living thing.

It wasn't only nature she transformed. At a tiny branch library she introduced me to books. Learning to read was no chore. How miraculous that a human being, long after death, could reach across the years and conjure in a reader's head images, tears, and laughter. She taught me about the music in language so that I could watch Olivier's *Richard III*, understanding nothing of the plot, but so spellbound that for some time thereafter I wrote only in unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Because life was sacred, every stray cat found shelter in our home. I remember the newborn kitten my mother brought to my bed one morning. I buried my nose in its warm fur and smelled the sweet smell of tentative life. I smelled it again 20 years later, when a beloved poodle lay dying in my arms. Perhaps it is the smell of eternity, lingering briefly after we enter this world, returning to signal our voyage home.

First my mother gave me life, then she gave me to life, orienting me positively to myself, to nature, and to human beings.

It is no accident that in many cultures the word for priest and teacher is the same, or that initially the sole purpose of higher education was training for the clergy. Education is inherently moral, teaching a profoundly religious act. For at the heart of my mother's magic, as with any great lesson, lay belief in the divinity of nature, in the integrity of creatures smaller than ourselves, in the awesomeness of mysteries. To discover a physical or mathematical law is to understand the symmetry of God. To fall

under the spell of literature is to be enchanted by the divine magic of creation. Remember your own best teachers: did they not give you this same gift? In celebrating the wonder

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and the goodness of the world, they gave you to life.

As Ryan (1988) has reminded us, American educators are particularly uncomfortable with the moral implications of teaching. My student teachers, grim Calvinists, are fond of telling me that their job is to teach their pupils survival skills: a sense of responsibility, basic competencies they will need to earn a living. They do not understand that the most important survival skill of all is being oriented to the sacred in life.

Others have written about the morality of teaching, but in a different sense. Lyons (1990) spoke of teachers' dilemmas as moral uncertainties, Ryan (1988) of preparing children for their moral responsibilities as adults, Tom (1984) of teachers as moral craftsmen who hold power over pupils and must make value judgments in constructing curriculum. I don't use "moral" in those senses. Perhaps spiritual would

be more accurate, closer to what Socrates meant when he suggested that the purpose of education is to make us good as well as intelligent.

Like you, I have read recent speculations about the diminished status of the teaching profession, the encroachment of government, the need to make research more accessible and meaningful. But I must confess to the shocking conviction that teaching lost its status when education became secularized, a tool for economic mobility; when concerns about the spiritual became embarrassingly atavistic. No matter how scientific the field of teacher education grows, no matter how ingenious the research, teaching will not regain its professional status until it reclaims its original spiritual imperative, and we once again acknowledge that all life serves an agenda beyond our understanding.

My mother died last summer. When we meet again, it will be as two souls so intertwined it is impossible to tell where one stops and the other starts. For, as our forebears understood, the primary function of a teacher is to touch another human being's soul and, in doing so, to turn it irrevocably to the light. □

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