

Honoring the Other Mothers

I had the good fortune of being raised by not just one excellent mother but also an entire community of them. And I'd have to say I'm the better for it.

I remember when Hillary Clinton's book *It Takes a Village* came out several years back, the accompanying uproar from conservatives was deafening. Many people saw it as a communal manifesto for socialism—where society takes over raising our children and we give up our parental power.

I have to confess that I've never read her book. I might have been too busy raising my kids to read about all the people it takes to raise kids.

But regardless of what you think of Hillary's book or her politics, the girl was sorta right in this one regard: If you are born female, it certainly does take a lot of mothers in your life to be fully mothered and well-mothered.

It is hard for me to admit that there might be something my daughter, Elyse, needs in her life that my limited experience or expertise cannot provide for her. But I truly believe that no one should have to mother alone.

Mothers, Mothers Everywhere

My mother's guidance was important to me, but I also had the input of my **grandmothers** and aunts and family friends and mentors. I am old enough to recall when you could get in trouble everywhere in your town by any female adult who felt motherly toward you.

If someone caught you doing anything immoral, illegal, disrespectful or even questionable, they were not deterred by the fact that they did not share your particular DNA. If you were wrong, they felt a social obligation to step in and

mother you correctionally.

This might have involved giving you a good talking to, possibly applying some immediate form of discipline and assuring you that, should you choose not to confess to your own mother upon your arrival at home, your mom would be told. And this was followed by a burning up of the party lines (for those of you under the age of 40, skip it—party lines are too hard to explain) faster than the speed of light so that, when you did arrive home, it was old news and your mom already had her speech ready and some form of discipline lined up.

You could waste your breath explaining, but the shame of someone else catching you misbehaving was unbearable for her. It was now her job to make it equally unbearable for you.

That was the downside of a community full of mothers. The upside was that you could also have a cadre of women who would love, support and encourage you in areas where your own mother did not have a background for input. This is the aspect of having “Other Mothers” that allows young women to excel and spread their wings beyond their own heritage.

Spiritual Mothering

Sometimes it's easy to discount the praise or encouragement of your own mother because you suspect that it isn't exactly objective. But when women who are not bound to you by relational duty look into your life and tell you that you are gifted you tend to believe them.

I believe it is a tragedy that we are losing our sense of this in our society. There used to be a time when you could be mothered not only by your own mom but also by a **stepmom**, your **grandma**, your auntie, your schoolteacher, your Sunday school teacher, your friend's mom and even your mother-in-law.

In some church cultures they appoint “**church mothers**,” and these powerful, God-fearin' women are deputized to ask you

embarrassing questions and basically get up in your business. It's their spiritual imperative.

My friend Skip is a spiritual mother. She is single and has no biological children, but she has many people who look to her for wisdom and guidance.

One special relationship with someone who asked Skip to step in and help her to heal from the estrangement from her biological mother has been particularly rewarding. Skip's "daughter of choice" is a woman whose life looks very different from her own, but they have mutually chosen to enter into this relationship and have the freedom to be honest with each other at all times.

Skip was an adopted child and describes her own mother as godly, gracious and tied in to her community as she taught school for decades and kept up with her students through the years. Many of these same traits can be said of Skip, and her life purpose is to nurture believers into mature disciples.

Her own mother's example coupled with Skip's vocational choices (she is a nurse, speaker, author and life coach) point to her love for helping people. But when Skip was approached about being a spiritual mother to a younger friend her first reaction was reluctance. But as their bond grew deep, Skip realized that "spiritual mother/daughter relationship" more accurately defined what was happening than anything else.

A Grandmother Is a Gift

Sometimes your Other Mother is there out of necessity. My mom's mom was my first Other Mother. Nana wasn't highly educated in book learnin' (I think she may have finished the eighth grade), but she had done her "post grad" in the School of Hard Times and had her honorary doctorate in How the World Works.

The great thing about spending time with your grandmother is that (1) she thinks you are The Cheese and (2) she is the only one who knows all the dirt on your mom.

This could explain the unspoken bond between grandmothers and grandchildren. Grandmothers are powerful. I am planning to use this power whenever I have grandchildren of my own. I have already ordered those T-shirts for kids that say, "What happens at Grandma's stays at Grandma's."

I was privileged to have two very different types of grandmothers in my developing years. I had my Nana in Texas, and when my mother remarried I got the bonus of another type of grandmother. Ludie Pulliam was a chemist who was chosen to work on the development of the hydrogen bomb during World War II.

Their family relocated to Los Alamos when my stepfather was young, and their life was quite different from Nana's. Ludie had a housekeeper and cook and worked her entire adult life as a scientist until she retired and moved back to Laurel, Mississippi, to be near her family.

She was my grandmother who loved sports, card games and frying shrimp. My Nana didn't know the first thing about sports, considered playing cards a sin and never peeled a shrimp in her life. But my life is the richer for the diversity of my grandmothers.

I am grateful that my daughter is experiencing the same thing with her grandmothers. My mom loves all things domestic and my husband's mom loves all things educational.

Elyse has one of each: a cooking grandmother and a read-aloud grandmother. That doesn't mean that either could not do both, but why not just let everyone flow in their areas of giftedness?

Nana died when I was 18 years old. All the women that she

mothered (daughters, granddaughters, nieces, daughters-in-law, friends) grieved the passing of a woman who felt no higher calling than to serve and encourage others.

My mom told me that she felt protective of her mother all of her life because my grandmother's health was already in decline by the time my mom was old enough to help around the house. My mother felt motherly toward her mother.

But my mom does not recall ever having any feelings of angst or resentment toward her mother, mostly protective feelings toward Nana. This is the way it works with mothers and daughters.

Complexity and tangled feelings can flip the script and keep things emotionally out of order. Regardless of the situation, the mother/daughter bonds are fierce and powerful and leave an enormous tear when one leaves this earth.

As my mom was only 39 when her mother died, she was left motherless as she was approaching middle age. It has been interesting to watch her choose her own Other Mothers. In the years since Nana's passing, my mom has stayed in contact with various women who were friends of her mother and has allowed these women to mother her.

She did not wait for these Other Mothers to come into her life. She made regular phone calls, sent cards and stayed involved in their lives.

Very Special Honorees

There is a group of women who are thrust into Other Mother status: **stepmoms**. Of all the Other Mothers, this role requires the most patience, tenacity and understanding. The children of the first marriage feel that the entrance of the stepmom signals the death of the first family, so they can't help but view her with distrust and suspicion.

Stepmoms are often perceived as intruders, unwanted love-stealers interloping through a house of hurt, trying to build new relationships with children who don't even want her there, much less in their lives. I have seen some navigate with grace and others crack beneath the incredible strain of being rejected day after day. God bless the stepmothers of the world. Theirs is a difficult row to hoe.

Then there are the **mothers-in-law**, the women who raise the men we marry. To them we owe a debt of gratitude for raising a son who knew a good thing when he saw it!

I am thankful for my mother-in-law, Vesta, and her love for John. When she recounts stories of John's life pre-me, I feel that I am getting an important glimpse into the events that shaped him into the man I came to love.

Allow your mother-in-law her own special place among your Other Mothers and let her know that she is appreciated. Without her perspective you may never fully understand what makes your man tick.

I have had Other Praying Mothers, specifically a little dynamo of a woman in Pearl, Mississippi, by the name of Mrs. Maizie James. She has many children and grandchildren of her own. Yet she chose to adopt me as a daughter-in-prayer and prays for me every single day.

Other Mothers are a gift we give our daughters and ourselves. To have Other Mothers does not diminish your own mother.

There is a richness in the many women who can step in and care for us, impart life experience and wisdom to us, and give of themselves to another generation. We are the better for them. And so are our daughters.

I can't see that my mother or I would be the women we are without the lingering influence of Nana in our lives. She

taught us about tenacity in tough times and the rewards of faithfulness in the life of a believer, and that a meal did not have to be elaborate to be wonderful.

So it is that Nana's presence is with us, in my mother and myself, as we look at Elyse and see the generational ripples in the pond. I can honestly say that I pray for Elyse to have a slew of Other Mothers in her life, women who can fill the gaps I might not even be able to see.

You may be a woman who needs an Other Mother. You might be a woman with Other Mothering to give.

Truth is, you're probably both. I hope that you will seek out the Other Mothers you need and give Other Mothering liberally to the girls coming up the path behind you. Maybe, in that case, if it's not one thing, it's your Other.

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