

Seven Things My Mother Taught Me About Kindness

My 93-year-old mother, Jean, doesn't talk anymore. Her dementia was already severe before the pandemic started. These days, I'm blessed if I can get her to smile when I visit her nursing home or when I bring her to my house for a meal. Her blank stares are a painful reminder that she is almost gone.

But I will take her to church this Christmas Eve and I'll park her wheelchair on the front row so she can hear the music. I'll cherish the moments, even if she can't tell me if she remembers the songs.

I'm sad that my mother has lost most of her cognitive abilities. But in some ways I'm glad she doesn't know what's going on in our country right now. She doesn't listen to the news anymore. She has no idea we've endured a pandemic. She would be shocked to hear how people talk to each other in 2021.

My mother grew up in Georgia in the Great Depression. Her life was shaped by her faith in Jesus and she was a stickler for manners—which she rigidly enforced on me when I was a kid. I didn't appreciate her household rules back then but today I wish everybody would consider what she modeled:

1. If you can't say something nice about someone, keep your mouth shut. Social media has made it easy for us today to be rude and crude. We drop verbal bombs on each other and then people applaud the hatefulness. We love to “slay” people with our comments, or “throw shade.” The way we talk to each other today is actually devilish.

2. Always say please and thank you. This was an ironclad rule in my house. My mother believed kids should be respectful to their elders and that gratefulness is a virtue. If we would

force ourselves to say please and thank you today, we might have fewer entitled whiners in this world. (My mother also made me write thank-you notes for any gifts I received.)

3. If you stay at someone's home, leave it nicer than you found it. It never made sense to me when I was growing up but my mother instilled in me respect for other people's property. So today, if I stay at your house, I might offer to do the dishes. And if I break something of yours, I'll pay for it. In 2021, respect for others has sunk to an all-time low, which might explain why we hear about a new smash-and-grab looting incident almost every night.

4. Never let a filthy word come out of your mouth. The worst expletive I ever heard my father say was, "Criminy!," which in rural Alabama is sort of like saying, "Holy cow!" But my mother rarely even used that expression. She used restraint with her words, which is something we could sure use today—when expletives have lost their shock value because they are so common. "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth"—from Ephesians 4:29 (NASB1995)—was her rule.

5. Never talk about people behind their backs or spread gossip. When I was ten years old, a kid in my neighborhood told me that another kid's parents were getting divorced. I said something about this to another neighbor kid, and my mother took me in another room and read me the riot act for discussing other people's private lives. She was as stern as I'd ever seen her. My mom taught me that we should respect people enough not to believe everything we hear about them.

6. One of the nicest things you can do for people is feed them. My mother didn't teach me to cook but she modeled what it means to be gracious and hospitable. If someone was sick, she made a casserole or some soup for them. If someone died, she cooked several meals and delivered them to those who were grieving. If someone visited unexpectedly, she served some iced tea and offered something to eat. Is it just me or does

it seem like we've lost the concept of tender, loving care?

7. Give gifts often and don't expect anything in return. Both of my parents were givers. If we went out to eat, my dad would fight me for the bill after the meal. And after my dad died, my mother would stumble over herself to thank me if I paid for anything. At Christmas, she would have been happy if there were no gifts under the tree for her—but she was genuinely grateful for the insignificant gifts I gave her, including the \$3 bar of soap or the cheap perfume.

I don't know how much longer I'll have my mother but my prayer for 2022 is that genuine kindness won't die with her and her generation. Have a Merry Christmas, y'all. {eoa}

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