

GRANDMOTHER—SOURCE OF UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Whereas my Mother took her child-rearing strategy from the example of her father, a benevolent and just master of discipline, her mother became the model for her relationship to her husband—unquestioning love and devotion, and an attitude of servanthood. I would find in my grandmother, Bessie Shepard Dyer, the unconditional love I craved.

Bessie was a Cockney, born "within the sounds of Bow Bells", a church in London. At sixteen, Bessie came across the Atlantic, and settled in Charleston, Maine, fifty miles northwest of Bangor. She became live-in hired help for a farmer named Herb Howes. We always heard him called 'Erb 'Ows in Grandma's Cockney accent. She scrubbed floors and cooked meals, and did the laundry in galvanized iron tubs for the family and for their hired hands.

In time, Howard Dyer came courting and soon Bessie and Howard married and set up housekeeping on a farm. When Howard suddenly died in 1912 in his early fifties, Bessie picked up the reins of management of the orchard and animals without missing a beat. But a bleak sorrow hovered over the home. Soon Bessie moved away from the farm, to a cottage in the village, the place where I spent many happy summer vacations as a child. The memories come back readily through my childhood's heightened sense of smell.

The kitchen was often suffused with a floury odor laced with a hint of molasses whenever Grandma made cookies or gingerbread. As soon as they were laid out on racks to cool, my brother and his cousin would swoop up a handful, with Grandma scolding them, but in such a way that I could tell she was more pleased than angry.

There was no underground drain for waste water from our sink and the laundry tubs sitting in a side room, so a slightly putrid smell arose from the swirling gray residue in the yard outside whenever we washed dishes or clothes. In contrast, the sweet spring water which we trudged a quarter mile up the road to fetch smelled fresh.

A friendly burn smell filled the kitchen whenever my mother and aunt heated the heavy "sad irons" on the back of the wood stove. The ironing board cover was always covered with scorch marks. I was proud when I was old enough to be trusted to use these clumsy appliances.

We loved these family times in Grandma's home. I remember seeing her scrunch up her face as she wrung out the laundry by hand. I hovered near as she painstakingly sewed quilts, working the stitches inch by inch with her gnarled work-worn fingers. She sang in a high nasal crooning voice, her piercing dark eyes crinkling with a smile. On a Sunday morning she would clip the stray hairs on her chin, sweep up her white hair in a bun,

plunk on a straw hat, and set out for church. Everyone loved her there, and the men, especially, treated her gallantly, offering help with an arm as she struggled down the steps or got into a car for the ride home. In her own eyes, she was simply an 'umble person.

Grandma's presence in our home was a constant when I was growing up. Although she made regular trips to visit her other daughters, she considered our place to be her home. When I came home from college for Christmas my senior year, I remember Grandma pushing me away from the sink when I started doing the dishes.

"You're tired. You've been working hard at college," she chirped. "I'll do the dishes." I took one incredulous look at her diminutive eighty-three year old frame planted firmly at the sink. It took all my force to put my arms around her and carry her into the living room.

Two years later when I went home for Christmas, I saw that Grandma's health had deteriorated. Soon Grandma stopped eating. She had always served others; she had taken care never to be a burden. This was her only way to quietly ebb away.

A few weeks later my mother wrote me that Grandma had died. I laid my head on my desk and sobbed. The finality of death caught me by surprise. I did not want to be without my grandmother. Like so many other daughters, I had instinctively moved past my own mother to get to the "Grand Mother" in order to receive acceptance and approval. Getting this direct from the preceding generation was too fraught with expectations and judgments and fears. Writer Naomi Lowinsky notes that a woman "is easily polarized with her mother. She needs the power of the . . . grandmother, the one who is a generation removed. . .to help her find her way."¹ Grandmother love was safe and enveloping and I basked in it.

Tensions with my mother put my own capacity for maternal warmth at peril, as I grew. It was easy to turn against all that my mother represented, and in the process unwittingly destroy a precious legacy mothers give their daughters—the power to nurture. I would need that capacity in the life calling which later emerged, that of encouraging others in personal spiritual growth. The heritage my grandmother imparted saved some of that motherly legacy in me.