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*A Special Collection of Essays  
Written by Marcia Byalick*

The  
**WOMEN'S**  
**RECORD**

Dear Reader:

If you've never experienced an essay by Marcia Byalick (for you'll do much more than read it!), you're in for a special treat. For the past five years, Marcia's essays have appeared as a Page Three feature in *The Women's Record*. She's become much more than an Ellen Goodman, an Erma Bombeck, or an Ann Landers to our readers who value her insight, humor, compassion, and honesty. The Byalick voice is uniquely her own, a voice that struggles at times to come to terms with her losses (both large and small), her relationships with her family and friends, her personal and professional growth, and the basic inconveniences of living the life of an educated, sensitive woman on Long Island in the 90s.

Just as Marcia has become a treasured friend to her editor, Carol Weiss; a source of inspiration to the young woman who's captured her words on the computer, Marian Vollaro; and a woman whose love is boundless to her publisher, so too will she carve a special place in *your* heart.

Enjoy these essays which reflect the magic of being a contemporary woman.

Cordially,



Jane S. Gitlin  
Publisher  
*The Women's Record*

## ***What We Hate about the Men We Love***

Most of us commit ourselves, after that distortion of reality, that temporary insanity called romantic love, to living life side by side (sometimes back to back) with the male of the species. We are taken by the passion with which they fall in love; their drive, their muscles, their intensity. And then as the hair falls off their heads and sprouts out of their ears, these strong and childish creatures reveal their true selves. All of a sudden every new adjustment becomes a crisis in self esteem. As they amass all things digital and computerized, micro-sized and battery operated, their attention drifts from their beloved. To talk of more important issues. Like the last guy they almost killed in anger, or why their car is the best one made or how many points they scored the last time they played basketball (be it 10 years before...), anything but what we consider conversation. Yet 85% of the women polled by Lifetime's Cable TV Network said they would remarry their current husband—not just because of love or security or children, I'm convinced—but because deep down inside we know a secret truth. No matter how different they might look, no matter who raised them in the kinds of habits that grate and irritate, they're all the same...

***"Men build bridges and throw railroads across deserts and yet they contend successfully that the job of sewing on a button is beyond them. Accordingly, they don't have to sew buttons."***

**Heywood Broun**

There is something primitive in men that allows them to clip their toenails in the bedroom, drink straight from the milk container in the refrigerator, empty hair from the electric shaver in the sink, and belch loudly (and proudly) in front of practically anyone. It's a weird genetic blindness that these creatures of habit have to things not important to their keen sense of order. The same man who misses the garbage every time he throws something away, the same person who renders food totally inedible by the way he rewraps it is appalled at the condition of your car's interior and can't stand the way you hang up his clothes.

Women are professional "I'm sorry" sayers, advice takers and quick recoverers. We take it for granted that we make mistakes, that we can learn from others, that when we feel sick, we will soon be better. Not so with men. When we are wrong it's totally natural to apologize—it not only feels good for the person hearing it, it's guilt reducing for the apologizer. Men somehow feel it's too humbling to say they're sorry, never for a moment realizing how appealing humility can sometimes be. For a man to admit that he doesn't know how to get where he's going would be to reveal a perceived weakness that he's damned if he's going to show. He will forgive a woman anything but the knowledge that he is overmatched, and although he knows it to be true, he resents that somehow she knows him better than he knows himself. Except if he's sick. Then a simple cold can reduce a growling bear to a run-over pussycat. Pride goes out the door as he counts the sneezes and tissues which he's sure are bringing him ever closer to death's door.

Difficulties arise understanding how a man who will go into rage over a beer bottle thrown on his lawn or a driver who cuts him off on the parkway has such a hard time telling his wife what's on his mind. Men hate to argue with women and so do triple damage by not releasing festering ulcer fodder. "Let's talk about it" is a phrase that strikes terror in the hearts of men by pressuring them to be intimate, to open up. They would almost rather lose in a competitive event (and what man plays anything just for the sport?) than get into the dynamics of an incident. Men can talk easily about the most important things to perfect strangers or statistics and trivia to those they know better, but when forced to discuss how they feel, they turn into silent partners. Women enjoy simply sitting and talking, comfortable with undirected conversation about the humanity they naturally see, feel and react to more than men. For a man to give a conversation without scores or dollar signs his undivided attention is rare. Alan Alda summed it up in his movie *A New Life* when he plaintively asks his divorce lawyer, "Doesn't she realize I can't read the paper and talk at the same time?"

***"Once a man would spend a week patiently waiting if he missed a stagecoach, but now he rages if he misses the first section of a revolving door."***

**Siemon Strunsky**

Living with a man going through midlife crisis requires the patience, compassion and sense of humor found only in superior women. Powerful men lucky enough to finally achieve their

goals become restless and troubled. Men who've never indulged in thought, suddenly re-evaluate their judgments in terms of how much time they feel they have left to live. To counteract the difficult acceptance of love handles, thinning hair, bad backs and stomachs that can no longer tolerate pounds of pepperoni, they have affairs, become more fearful of the unfamiliar and less often play games they don't feel they can win. Anger is seen in their overreaction to life's stressors, whether they be a rude waiter or less-than-perfect workmanship on a home repair. And their fears are visible in the way they cringe at the inevitably more frequent appearances of illness and death as they grow older.

Sharing a life with a gender to whom security means owning 40 pairs of socks, putting ketchup (or barbecue sauce or salt or Miracle Whip) on dinner until it's unrecognizable, and reminiscing about "the good old days" in a way to insinuate life can never be that good again is a decision many of us willingly have made. The arrested development we constantly sigh over gives us the opportunity to use our best parts—our ability to help and heal, and soften and encourage. From what I observe, the rapt attention young men give their loves returns once more in their later years. And if you're lucky enough until then to have a man who knows how to make you laugh, it's a piece of cake to overlook the rest...

## *Soulmates*

The fact that Jill and I have anything in common at all is almost as much of a miracle as the incredible bond we share. She's single, independent, funky and has gorgeous red hair to die for. I'm married, have kids, thrive on lists and schedules, love to stay home. She lives in California, I'm in New York; she's game to try anything, I have to read Consumer Reports first. She's breezy, I'm centered. She'll get there whenever, I sleep with a watch. Yet that miraculous, mysterious combination of elements that makes of two strangers, loving friends, is present so intensely, it's hard to believe we met by chance. It's hard to believe our giddy minds are so in synch that we can watch someone walk by and immediately come up with the same evaluation of their character and worth as a human being. And it's even harder to believe my friend Jill's just endured a bone marrow transplant with the grace, strength and humor reserved for heroes.

We met 21 years ago on a tour bus in Israel. I was a teacher on my honeymoon, she was a teacher spending the summer traveling with a friend. We noticed each other when the tour guide made a lame joke and we were the only ones laughing (more to protect his ego than to applaud his wit, I'm sure). We all had dinner that night, "hit it off" as they say and said goodbye promising to look each other up if we were ever in Chicago or New York. Two weeks later, walking through London, we met again. Small world was not enough of an explanation for such an amazing coincidence. It had to be fated for us to continue our relationship when we got home. For over 20 years, although we've never lived closer than 1500 miles apart, we remained friends. Since Jill was single for most of that time, she was the one to travel and came to New York at least once a year. For years she badgered me to come see what her life looked like but the kids, the house, my insecurity, kept me home and her visiting.

At the beginning we wrote long letters back and forth. There was one year when Jill spent months in Saigon during the Vietnam War, sharing a hotel room with a journalist boyfriend she was going to marry. I was lonely with a three month old and a nervous husband back in school in Athens, Georgia. Our letters, hers full of war, deadlines, love and boredom, mine of baby, no money, anti-Semitism and boredom were at once a release to write and a precious gift to receive.

The years passed and we continued to keep up with each other's ups and downs. Long distance phone conversations replaced long letters. I loved hearing about her writing songs, winning a Clio award, meeting men. My stories of family successes and disasters, the road for her not taken, gave her the scoop on the other side. She came to New York on business at least once a year and stayed with us—short, hurried but better-than-nothing visits where we talked till we fell asleep and could never get over how easy it was to pick up where we left off. And when I got a call, early one Saturday morning ten months ago, prefaced with "fasten your seat belt, I've got to talk to you," I knew I was in for a bumpy ride.

The train she'd felt running across her chest was a recurrence of the breast cancer she had had eight years before. After some chemotherapy, a visit to M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, exhaustive research and hours and hours of phone calls, a bone marrow transplant, to be done at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha, was decided as the plan of action. Finally, I was going to visit Jill.

We spent the essence of "quality time" together in Omaha this summer during her three month hospital stay. There was no question that the only way I could survive her enduring what was described as "horrific" treatment was to be there with her. Not so much because I wanted to (I'd have loved to convince myself she didn't need me, it wasn't necessary, I'd keep up by phone), but because I had to. It was much easier to handle this crisis in person than waiting and worrying. And never in my life did I get back so much for what I gave.

Leave it to Jill, I never had to cope with what I was most afraid of. I knew I could handle the baldness, the retching, even the weakness. What I feared was her fear, her depression. I didn't count on the fact that my friend of 20 years, who I would've sworn I knew inside and out, was a closet hero.

Her massive reserves of courage, positive thinking and the world's best sense of humor made my job easy. It was the first time in all the years we'd been friends that we were able to spend whole uninterrupted days together. We read, watched Woody Allen movies and laughed, so long and so loud, I think the nurses thought we were on drugs. We stood out in homogeneous Omaha, the wise cracking L.A. single and the Long Island matron. We were so totally natural, so 100% comfortable being together that it shocked everyone who asked us how we knew each other, how skimpy our actual time together was. I wanted to give her what I was sure she needed (actually, what I projected I would need if I were her), a person she could "why me?" to, someone she could rage and cry and spit out her anger to over how unfair, how despicably unfair, this life was being to her. But she was too busy making herself available to new patients who were coming in for the treatment, reassuring them how much easier it was to live through than anticipate. She was too busy opening the mail (over 200 cards arrived from her immediate world), and volunteering for tests to help with new research and helping a nurse write lyrics to a rap song for a supervisor who was retiring. It wasn't draining spending time there, it was energizing. In a sterile environment where blowing her nose or brushing her teeth or cleaning her ears were forbidden because of her precarious blood count, we played Big Boggle, rated each of her doctors (as girls are wont to do about boys) and laughed.

We both tried to analyze what makes us work. More than the superficial (I want to hear everything about her friendship with Roseanne Arquettes' mother and Erma Bombeck's son and the voice of Garfield the Cat; she's curious about how 22 year marriages work, how you coordinate a holiday meal for 18, what I'm writing about next), is the enormous admiration we share for the others' intuitive "getting" of our senses of humor. When the men in her life have revealed by their words and actions their low place on the evolutionary chain and we both feel the exact same combination of resignation, frustration and amusement, there's a molding of souls that's absolutely magical. When I need a title for an article and after just a brief description of what I'm looking for, she comes up with one that's just perfect, it's a collaboration of the highest order. She's as there for me telling her how I waited on the checkout line for 45 minutes in the supermarket with \$125 worth of groceries, \$40 cash and no more checks with which to pay, as I am for her going through the terrors of battling cancer.

We know each other's favorite foods, favorite colors, favorite authors, though we share not one. Not because we grew up together or work together or share a street address, a cause or a hobby are we friends in the richest sense of the word. Even more mystical than falling in love, where sex, economics and unreal expectations come into play, is the voodoo that makes our relationship work. What defines us beyond the mutual moaning about our thighs, beyond her making fun of my rigidity and my rolling my eyes at her eating habits, is the fact that each of us thinks the other is uniquely "hot stuff."

Facing the nitty gritty with an unconditional honesty that's at once terrifying and liberating, we're both doing this growing up thing together. Taking into account the pace at which we're moving and the distance we have to cover to approach thinking of ourselves as mature adults, it just might take forever to arrive.

## Talk 40 to Me

It was this time last year when I heard the shot fired. The Today Show was on and Jane Pauley's cohorts surprised her with a picture they'd found from her high school yearbook. "She graduated in '19 mumble mumble," they joked, taking for granted the bad taste of revealing a woman's age. Jane saw no humor in their coyness. In fact she was annoyed. "1968" she said clearly, over their laughter. "I graduated in 1968." That night Michelle Marsh, a local anchorwoman, celebrated her birthday. "How old are you now?" sang the weatherman. "Leave her alone" countered the sportscaster protectively. "I'm 31," answered Michelle, looking as if she wondered why she was expected to keep her age a secret. How much younger could she possibly have been? It crossed my mind that I was a number of years older than both these successful attractive personalities. That surprised me. I was used to models and actresses being younger than I, but newscasters? In the afternoon paper there was an article about my congressman returning from a trip abroad. Looking at his face carefully, I realized that even he was younger than I. It's a year later and I'm thinking of my birthday, approaching at high speed in three weeks. I look in the mirror and without acknowledging the familiar face, I see 11 gray hairs, a worry line across my forehead that I swear assumed gully-like proportions since last I'd looked, and three large freckles that at best were caused by sun damage, at worst are old age liver spots. It was truly incredible; while I'm still busily planning what to do with my life when I grow up, time's been racing ahead at what feels like double speed. How could it be? Howdy Doody and I were 40.

I admit it does seem like a long time since I walked around braided and braless in the olden days of white lipstick and mini skirts. When one of my daughters recently dressed up as a teenager from the 60s, I remembered how exotic it felt to dress up "like the 40s" at her age. Explaining to her how girls couldn't wear pants to school, or how, in a world before cable, computers and video games, we got along fine with a three channel 12 inch black and white TV, I felt as if I was talking about centuries, not decades ago. I never realized how primitive my childhood appears without summer camp, car pools and shopping malls. Just when my daughter looked about ready to weep, I threw in the good stuff—double features at the movies, regular size candy bars for a nickel and delicious Bazooka bubble gum that came in two small hard squares for a penny.

I guess it's just hard for me to see myself as a matron, a "Ma'am," a "lady." Since that bullet whizzed past me, I've become aware of subtle changes in behavior which separate me from my peers a decade younger. My tolerance for extremes has lessened. When any situation becomes "very" (as in very crowded, very noisy, very late), I become irritable and cranky. No more concerts in Madison Square Garden for me.

When I want to lose five pounds to fit into last season's great black dress, I start dieting a month, not a week before, or I'll be buying one of this spring's big shirts to hide my failed attempt. I sleep better after drinking coffee that's decaffeinated. It's becoming increasingly difficult to read romantic best sellers without getting bored. No more do I assume any story has a happy ending. No longer do I take for granted the good health of those I love.

I find I'm becoming increasingly resistant to change. After more than a year I'm still forgetting to dial 718 and have to be reminded to fasten my seatbelt. When I do anything in excess (eat, drink, exercise, sunbathe, even work), I am prepared to suffer the negative physical effects that are bound to follow. I've learned that expressions like, "it's only fair," "I'm positive," "I expect" and "forever" lead to disappointment, if taken literally, and have limited place in the adult world. Comfortingly, life does allow some things to remain the same. I still read "Dear Abby," wear sneakers and chew bubble gum. I still love pizza, Paul Newman and Beatles music. And I still feel like I have a lot of growing up left to do.

I've always prided myself on the liberal attitudes with which I've raised my children. It feels eerie to suddenly be aware of the generation gap widening beneath my feet. Here I am feeling cool, "in," "with it" (the best evidence of which is that my clothes are worth borrowing)—and I'm still shocked daily. My favorite song in sixth grade, as documented by my autograph album, was "A Summer Place." My daughter's favorite at the same age was "I Don't Give A Damn About My Bad Reputation." This same 13 year old made me sweat when she asked as she tried on last year's jeans, "Ma, are you sure these don't make me look like a hooker?" Her 16-year-old sister hums the number one hit, "Touch Me, I Want to Feel Your Body" and talks of groups with names like "The Sex Pistols." Watching Madonna or David Lee Roth's explicit videos on MTV makes

me feel like a voyeur, eavesdropping on a conversation I thoroughly disapprove of. My friends' sons are starting to drive and all of a sudden I feel like Mrs. Robinson. Language is looser, jeans are tighter, and I'm awkward trying to feel at home in my four decade old skin.

When I went to my 20th high school reunion, I found the women (with the help of makeup, hair color and control top panty hose) looking much better than the men. I wonder exactly when it will be that this fact inevitably reverses itself. When was it that I started looking at men with gray hair and found them distinguished and attractive, not pale and over the hill? When my hairdresser recently asked if she should pull out my gray hairs, I said no. I feel I've earned each one and somehow it's foolish and dishonest to hide them. Gloria Steinem, as she turned 40, was told she didn't look her age at all. "This is what 40 looks like" she brilliantly answered. That was 12 years ago, and she still looks pretty terrific. So the trick to handling the trauma of entering a new decade seems not to bite the bullet or try in vain to outrun it or slow it down, but simply to trot comfortably alongside with an eye toward Helen Hayes and Katherine Hepburn in the distance, and an admiring glance in the mirror, every once in a while.

## Mother's Day

I face this Mother's Day as a newly motherless child. It is the first year I won't receive a beautiful (but washable) floor length nightgown to add to the dozen or so she had previously given me. The first year I won't hug the one person who thought my talents unique, my jokes hysterical and my successes extraordinary—100% of the time. I'll spend this May 10th primarily as receiver, the center of the holiday rather than the appreciative child. This change of positioning brings with it the increased responsibility to be wise, to be generous, to be stable. It's made me re-evaluate the job I'm doing, reflect on the goals I've set and compare the quality of my mothering with those before me and those around me. And I owe to my wonderful role model the courage to believe I'll survive the scrutiny just fine.

The unconditional selfless loyalty a mother's love aspires to is an awesome burden for today's already overloaded nurturers. We want the best for our children, indeed sacrifice a bit of ourselves (on a bad day a large chunk!) every day after conception to insure it, yet rarely feel we're doing the best job we can. April's issue of *Good Housekeeping* found that only one out of four mothers had mostly positive feelings about motherhood. Ann Landers reported over 70% of the women answering her survey would not have children if they had life to live over again. No topic will unite any peer group faster, no matter what stage of adulthood they're undergoing, than the issues involved in mothering and being mothered. And I'll bet these communication problems take up thirty minutes of every therapy hour.

My grandmother's generation was rewarded with a great showing of filial devotion. These women, who had the strength of three men, who came alone on huge boats, overcame loneliness, language barriers and poverty to create large families in a new land. Their children silently watched the toll years of scrubbing and struggling wrought on their mothers, making them old at 50. A mother's health and welfare was a child's responsibility and children became caretakers early on. Only the ungrateful would not acknowledge the enormous debt owed. Resentment was unexpressed. The right thing was done. Then they had children of their own and the confusion began.

Trouble started when progress, with its psychology and leisure, brought with it permission to be selfish. Children might still be the center of your life—but not your entire reason for being. I remember being pregnant and reading a quote by Henry Ward Beecher that said, "What a Mother sings to the cradle goes all the way down to the coffin." I was overwhelmed with being responsible for so sacred a trust and feared I was too self-involved to ever be a successful mother. Luckily once my children were born, there was little time for such mellow moments of reflection and self-doubt. Now that they're older, and I'm 17 years into the process, I realize the better I feel about myself, the more fulfilled I am in other areas of my life, the better I am at mothering.

I found some parts of the job description easier to fulfill than others. Class mother and Brownie leader, homework helper and nurse, chauffeur and shopper, disciplinarian and confidante are roles that, although demanding, feel comfortable. But I'm lousy at getting out stains, making a French braid, sewing on labels and ironing a blouse. I've never worn an apron and I've baked two breads in my whole life. Socks with holes get thrown out, not darned, and anyone who eats off my floor does so at his own risk.

To be honest, my judgments are more often based on my mood than on consistency. My amount of patience had more to do with how the rest of my day went than the intensity of my children's demands. I long for quiet and neatness, one meal at dinnertime and small washes—and simultaneously dread it coming. I encourage honesty and openness, taking a risk and healthy self love, but wonder if I'm deep down liberal enough to accept its consequences. And even though I should know better, I wonder if love alone without the concomitant aura of valor and guilt will be enough to keep those Mother's Day cards coming in twenty years from now.

I believe that we're responsible for exhibiting through our lives and conversation what we'd like our children to become. I am always aware that like dieting and exercise, mothering is a lifetime commitment and the results of any laxness and neglect show up immediately. I am hopeful that the neuroses I pass on will be diluted with enough good intentions to leave only slight scars. I only pray that my kisses are as magical, my hugs as indescribably warm and my blanket-tucking as comfortable as those I remember. I hope my children will feel the oneness I felt knowing they're loved inside and out, unconditionally, even more intensely when they misstep. My mother was shy and would've blushed, but would've loved to know you read her daughter's acknowledgment of the beautiful job she did. So these thoughts are my Mother's Day gift to her. And making her proud still makes me feel so good.

## *Strategic Helplessness*

My husband is one of the most competent professionals I know. He is respected for his intelligence and compassion, admired for the muscles hundreds of hours of lifting hundreds of pounds have earned him, and loved by his family and friends for his generosity, kindness and wonderful sense of humor. He has a memory that amazes, calling up camp color war songs, old telephone numbers and the entire roster of any New York football/basketball/baseball team in the past two decades. His eye-hand coordination makes him a master of Nintendo; his quickness a formidable racketball opponent. But something weird happens to this superior being when he pulls into the driveway. It's as if there's a sign above the garage that says, "You are home now. Escape from excelling. Leave your competence behind."

Inside the house he moves slower and can't hear so well. He forgets where he put the channel changer and starts to sweat if a high hat bulb has to be changed. He forgets (after countless reminders) to put out the garbage, bring the luggage up from the basement, bring his old clothes to Good Will. In short he's transformed, as are most married suburban males, into one afflicted with HAPHS—helpless, absentminded, preoccupied husband syndrome.

It took a while for me to realize there was method to his mindlessness. After years of hearing "How am I supposed to know that's where you put the mayonnaise...the pliers...the umbrella"...or "I guess I'll never figure out how that paper towel holder...coffee maker...new litterbox...works," I've finally accepted this seeming mental deterioration for what it is, the primal scream of the needy adult male. The mournful cry of this species is "Honey, can you help me out here?" The members are distinguished by their inability to locate most anything they need. They appear to be looking but they don't see. Likewise you'd swear that they're listening but they don't hear. And they have a strange aversion to giving you their undivided attention. Ask your man to look at you when you talk to him instead of sharing him with the TV, a newspaper or sleep, and the disdainful look you'll get will tell you you're branded demanding and vain. Except of course if the conversation concerns the sprinkler system, a car accident or the death of a loved one.

As able as they are to discuss the nuances of a perfect pitch or adjust a stereo so minutely that only the dog might notice, this acute awareness of the surroundings is strategically self serving. I've seen brilliant negotiators and perceptive psychologists walk into a kitchen thick with tension and notice nothing amiss; I've seen men who thrive on cut-throat power struggles give it their best shot and lose to a ten year old's request for an unreasonable extended privilege or an absurd expensive frill. I've seen men who make life and death decisions, who control multi-million dollar companies, walk around the supermarket, list in hand, hollow eyed and paralyzed in front of the detergents. ("She said Tide. What size? In a powder? A liquid?) They look almost pitiful, Phi Beta Kappa though they may be, as they silently pray that no patient/client/customer/colleague come upon them in this state.

I think the 90s will see subtle changes in HAPHS. Our husbands are more conscious of life at home than our fathers were. At least they don't sit around watching TV wrapped in a bath towel



when their kids' friends come over. This generation of man is much more aware of the importance of staying in shape and maintaining a weight that's healthy. He knows that men who never cry or show weakness are not sturdy-as-an-oak role models but strong candidates for leaving this earth decades earlier than those more attuned to what they're feeling. The number of men I know who cried at the scene in *Field of Dreams* where father and son play an emotion laden, long overdue game of catch attests to the sadness they almost universally feel about the distance they felt from their own fathers. And most telling of all that the coma is lifting are the statistics showing that in 1975 27% of men were present at the birth of their children, while in 1985 80% were in the delivery room, complete with breathing instructions, camcorders and tears.

Part of being happily married has always been learning to do things you'd rather not do, simply to please your mate. For years when women brought just dinner to the table (not money, education and careers) they were more amenable to putting up with HAPHS. But just because we've changed, it doesn't follow that our husbands (babied and catered to by their moms) come to us needing to be cared for or about any less. I've recently read that a good predictor of your own level of health is to look at your spouse's health habits, that most long married couples have almost identical cholesterol and blood pressure readings. They are similarly over or underweight and similarly satisfied with life. Their emotional and physical well being becomes ours as well. And so we'll see them through the fog of HAPHS for at least the remainder of this lifetime. After all it's one of the things we do best.

Happy Father's Day.

## *Friends—Birds of a Feather*

*"Friendship is almost always the union of part of one mind with part of another; people are friends in spots."*

George Santayana

Summertime rewards me with the luxury of seeing just how well my spots are covered. Life slows down enough to include time out for some midweek dinners, a few overnight mini-vacations and unfamiliar quiet in which to reflect on the wonderful life-enriching relationships I'm involved in. Trusting, intimate, loving friendships form the safety net I count on beneath me as I precariously race through autumn, trudge through winter and glide through spring. I associate friendships with summer; with stretching, yawning and relaxing. I'm not talking about long lost high school friends, former neighbors, business acquaintances, car pool buddies or men friends. But the real McCoy—the family you choose, not inherit.

My sister's my friend, so is my next door neighbor, my boss, and my writing teacher. Also included is the wife of my husband's best friend, my daughter's friend's mother and a woman I met on my honeymoon, who's lived thousands of miles away for the entire length of our twenty year relationship. Not to be forgotten are those from the "old neighborhood;" the girl who taught me how to play doctor when we were nine, the one who showed me how to kiss with my mouth open, and the best friend I doubled with on my very first date. These wonderful women have little in common aside from a remarkable tolerance of me. We share a unique set of prejudices which pretends not to notice mutual weaknesses and common faults. We commiserate about the mothers we've survived, the men we've chosen and the children we've raised. We damn each other's adversaries, blush at each other's embarrassing moments and shiver at each other's close calls with illness and accidents. We shine in moments of grief when hugs, tight, long and wordless, help ease the pain of reality. In fact I think it's what never needs to be said that proves our friendships' strengths. What is discussed is never as special as what never needs mentioning. Inhaling the silence comfortably, we reap the benefits of our shared history. And looking at yourself through the eyes of a good friend is better than a B12 shot for confidence and self worth.

*"Every man should keep a fair sized cemetery to bury the faults of his friends."*

Henry Ward Beecher

Friendships, like all relationships, need attention, yet the best ones miraculously can survive months of neglect. One of my greatest faults as a friend is my laxness in calling. This has less to do with not caring than it does a messed up sense of priorities which takes givens for granted. I can get away with it because my friends understand. Friendships contain lethal ammunition

when we disappoint each other, making it infinitely more difficult to stand up to a friend than an enemy. We're too heavily armed (you know how much she weighs, who she fantasizes about, how much she paid for her house...) for small fights and hesitate a thousand times before pulling out the nuclear power we know can destroy.

I admire something special about each of my friends: the funky way one dresses, the manner another patiently mothers; the skill with which one incredibly, creatively knits and the inspiring talent in another's writing; the freedom one exercises to dare the odds, and another's ability to make me laugh in twelve seconds. There's one who always surprises me and one I depend on for reassurance and no surprises. There's even one with whom I practice what I don't do enough of in the rest of my life—disagreeing. Some friends I drink tea with, one a martini, another a glass of milk and Mallomars and yet another cups and cups of black coffee. I fantasize about a huge pajama party where there'd be extended time for stroking and sharing. And I can tell from the new lines of greeting cards geared specifically toward friends—intimate, funny, moving thank-yous and love notes—that I am not alone in yearning for more time to spend with friends. And so thank God for summer and its less frenetic pace, giving friendship-like pearls the chance to absorb your skin's oils and become more lustrous. Like wine they grow more precious each year. Which is why whenever I make a wish on my birthday candles, I wish for my daughters—along with good health, fulfillment and love—the blessing of true friends. And wouldn't it be just the best if they included me among them.

## *A Good Father*

*"When one has not had a good father, one must create one."*

Friedrich Nietzsche

I've just come back from visiting my father in Florida. I'm still getting used to seeing him rinse out a glass, shop in the supermarket, buy his own underwear, throw in a wash. As a single man approaching the end of the seventh decade of his life, he's adjusting well to the business of taking care of himself. It's not that I thought him incapable, exactly, but to me my cigar-smoking hero used his power and strength to make tough decisions, solve large problems, voice loud opinions. This man who could never tolerate an order, apologize for a mistake or give a straight whole-hearted compliment remains an excellent father—for I'm convinced all a father of a daughter really has to give is his love—and she'll supply the fantasy.

My father wanted a son so desperately that he grabbed the doctor's lapels after hearing I was born and actually asked, "Are you sure, Doc?" Here was a man who loved the Yankees and west-erns, driving cars and playing handball, drinking whiskey and watching boxing. My four-year-old cousin echoed the thoughts of all those present when he anxiously asked his mother, "What are you going to do with her?"

"D'ya want me to speak to that guy," he would say chomping down on his cigar if I complained I was misunderstood or mistreated by anyone—whether a friend, my school principal or a salesperson. I always said no, sure that the terrible rage this strong protective man would vent on my "enemies" would be more horrible than even they deserved. I remembered a newspaper clipping from 1938 which showed my father as a young man on a picket line punching a strike breaker so hard he flew over the hood of a car. The Brooklyn Eagle photographer caught a mid-air shot of the poor man who had made the awful mistake of being on the wrong side of my father. That's what my dad could do if he were really angry.

My dad spent most of my childhood as owner of a small dry cleaning store. In the summer-time he came home white and drained each night after sweating off ten pounds since morning. I remember watching in awe as he drank one Coca Cola, then another, till his color and his energy returned. After he sold the store he started a trade newspaper, then imported dry cleaning equipment, sold tires and finally returned to the retail business. The years passed and each night and all day Sunday he would sink into his chair until bedtime. On his left would be an ashtray for his cigar and an ever present pad and pencil to jot down business brainstorm and mysterious lists of figures. My friends would tease about always finding him in the same place and ask if he traveled with his chair. From this seat (which my mother referred to as his throne) he would look over my homework, sign my report cards and give very firm discouraging handshakes to my dates (to weed out the ones with no backbones). The solution to every problem we ever faced

was arrived at there. It never occurred to me that his reign as King lasted only as long as he sat on that chair.

He was never sick, not ever, and never worried about money the way my mother did. That was because he never wanted what he didn't have, never needed what he couldn't provide. And no matter what my life lacked because of this attitude, I never dreamed that he was at fault. It never disappointed me when there was no money for vacations or dinners out, new clothes or out-of-town college. I never thought it strange that we never went to the beach or the park, never saw a Broadway show or went to a museum, never went to the rides or saw the fireworks. A man like him was surely doing the best he could do—I'd be ungrateful to expect more. All he had to do was love me, and I was a satisfied daughter. As Robert Frost once said, "You don't have to deserve your mother's love...you have to deserve your father's. He's more particular."

My dad hardly smokes anymore, uncharacteristically bowing to 1987's more assertive vocalizing about its odor and health hazards. I don't know exactly when I realized he bit his nails, that he had no hobbies, that he never remembered his anniversary. Even when it became obvious in retrospect that he was more lazy than tired, more selfish than exhausted—that it was insecurity, not overwork, that kept him sitting in the chair, it was somehow OK. My memories dwell on the intensity with which he took care of an ingrown toenail. When I was ten, the tenderness I felt when he banished 105 fever with his strong alcohol rub, the first time I ever saw him cry—when we danced the first dance at my wedding. I remember and all is forgiven, for little girls given constant love from their fathers know they're "hot stuff"—and they can handle the rest. Especially if loved by a man who smokes cigars.

## *Giving Her Wings*

*"There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots, the other wings."*

Hodding Carter

For an inexperienced, purple-thumbed gardener, I rooted my first born pretty well. As I prayed it would, most aspects of mothering come naturally. From her first kick in my ribs 18 years ago, the inexpressible love and gentleness that bind us have rendered my fumbblings minor, my mistakes fixable. But she's off to college this month and as both our hearts quicken at the prospect (hers accompanied by a smile a few shades more sincere than mine), I'm surprised at the emotions I'm feeling. From now on, (for the first time) each moment, each experience she has will take her to a place I've never been. She, I've no doubt, will do fine. But loosening my strongest bond makes me feel more than a little wobbly.

From the time she arrived as a "senile placenta," five and a half weeks late with fingernails like claws that left her face bloodied, till today, when we share the same naked body (I've apologized hundreds of times), ridiculously shaped freckles, identical handwriting and the obsessive perfect attendance award in high school, Jennifer and I have been quite the duo. We spent her first years isolated from friends and family in a small town in Georgia. Since we were each other's only show in town, we became fast buddies. At a year and a half she would answer anyone asking her age by saying "I'm 18 months old." God, she was brilliant. Growing up down South, my Brooklyn accent counted for naught as she yelled "Get the bawl, momma." She was so cute. And when she was three and her sister came along, she asked me straight-faced if we could make baby stew. "You know, put her in a pot and stir?" Boy, was she in touch with her feelings. I fast-forward through the years to admire her commitment to back-breaking three-times-a-week dance classes, her determination at 11 to lose 15 pounds—and keep it off through the years, her academic achievements. And I remember a note she put in my bag during the long, horrible year we watched my mother die in which she said, "I admire the kind of daughter you are and I just want you to know it's inherited..."

Now she's leaving for college. Life's highlights will not be photographed as often, the number of shared memories will be sparser. This past year I've practiced separating, pretending it felt natural being the mother of a young woman, that it was comfortable being non-judgmental and having no control over her life. So when she went to see *Burn This* on Broadway three times, I didn't say, "What a waste, see three different shows." When she buys clothes and they're always black, and I know she looks so good in pink and green—I keep quiet. And when she asked a

friend to the prom before giving him—or anyone—a chance to ask her, I hummed “The Star Spangled Banner” frantically, rather than say what I was thinking.

Aside from missing her daily presence, and losing my feeble excuse for buying Mallomars, I miss the confidence I used to feel in instinctively knowing the right answer. Up to this point, my goal has been to widen her horizons, broaden her exposure, increase her options. Now, as she leaves, faithfully following all the messages I’ve telepathically sent through the years, (“There’s nothing you can’t do,” “You are infinitely capable,” “Your choices are limitless...”), I’m scared that I’ve told her less than the truth. As much as I think I want her to fly, my own cautious inner voice is frightened about where she might land. Telling her to take a risk, to “Go for it” in situations where I didn’t—couldn’t—makes me question whether if what I’ve really been saying is don’t settle for what I’ve accomplished. And that’s not at all the message I’d want her to take away. I used to think that because of the lack of options I grew up with, it was luck and fate more than anything else that led to the good fortune of my life. The older I get, the clearer it becomes that luck or the presence of 1000 choices available to Jennifer and not to me have had very little to do with it. Nor do studying abroad, attaining a doctorate, or having 50 lovers before marriage. What matters is that she decide what her priorities are and honestly set about achieving them. What matters is that she learn to believe in the extraordinary person she is so that she might experience the trust and friendship and love that will complement any success she attains in other areas.

So, I spend my time convincing myself that come the day she leaves, just because everything will be different, doesn’t mean anything has really changed. My cookie cutter, mirror image, first-born still has a sniffable face, pinchable tush and the world’s softest heart. Years past believing that her future good and bad conduct depends on me, I look forward to an equalizing of our mutual dependence. I will believe researchers who have found that contrary to popular belief, the emptying nest syndrome leads to more happiness than loneliness, more freedom than sadness. September 2nd will find me driving her up to school praying that she puts socks on before November, eats something green at least once in a while and doesn’t forget to buy saline solution for her contacts, and praying she remembers that the part of herself she left at home, her alter-ego who will still fight her to the finish for all things chocolate, thinks she’s just about the best thing she’s ever done.

## *Queen of the Listmakers*

On any given day you can check through my bag and find a number of crumbled old lists of things to do. They all begin with an underlined day and date followed by about ten things I must (in actuality hope to) accomplish that day. A few items are listed just so I can gleefully cross them off (drive car pool, marinate chicken, 5:30 exercise class), a few are there to remind me of small errands I wouldn’t remember otherwise (pick up shoes at shoemaker, call dentist to make appointment, feed neighbors’ cat while they’re away), and a few are there (like “reach” schools when you apply to college) just so that I never have the satisfaction of crossing everything off (organize junk drawer, rewrite phone book, alphabetize recipes...). I arrange my life as if I’m back in school and at any given moment there’s going to be a surprise quiz worth 40% of my grade based on the number of uncrossed out “things” remaining on my list. While I no longer dwell on the state of my refrigerator or my reflection in the surface of anything in my kitchen, I must admit to a compulsive streak that makes me sometimes envy those who Mark Twain described as comfortably “Never putting off until tomorrow what they can do the day after tomorrow.”

Women are told that to avoid the stress that makes us more prone to heart attacks than ever before, we must avoid doing several tasks at one time. We’re told to set reasonable goals and establish a comfortable tempo we can live with. I find this advice as helpful as the height and weight charts in the doctor’s office, the forecast of fluorescent hot pants as “the” item for spring, the percentage of your salary you should be putting away for retirement since the day you got married—they’re not talking to me.

I don’t know a woman who just talks on the phone or just watches TV without folding laundry, emptying the dishwasher, crazy gluing a broken nail, opening the mail, making out checks or reading the paper. She listens to the wretched tales of what happened that day in school while waiting for gas, calling the guy to fix the gutters and leaders, and chopping vegetables. How rare is the luxury of doing just one thing at a time.

We could never get out of the house in the morning (when I swear the clock runs twice as fast as it does in the late afternoon) if we didn't move as if we were in one of those early Charlie Chaplin movies. We're putting up coffee while throwing in a wash, opening the curtains while feeding the cat. The back of my neck hurts before I even get to work because I'm invariably five minutes too late to get to the bank or bring my four broken watches to the jeweler. The days pile up like my stack of unread *New York* magazines, symbolizing lost opportunities to veg out and be simply entertained. And still there's so much that never seems to get done.

Sometimes I think if each month had an extra day devoted to "shoulds" (the things that remain forever undone on the bottom of each day's list), that would help solve my dilemma. Then I'd finally rid myself of nagging tasks and long overdue responsibilities. To make this day remotely bearable, I wouldn't clean. Straightening the linen closet, attacking the basement, putting the photo album in order all fall under the heading of cleaning which I've grown up to liken to shoveling the walk while it's still snowing outside. There are some things, after all, that doing well is simply a waste of time.

The list for my day of "shoulds" is probably not that different than yours. In no special order it includes:

1. Bring the five huge cartons of bank giveaways that have remained unopened on the top shelf of the garage for at least ten years to a worthwhile organization that desperately needs an electric waffle iron, an electric fondue, an electric hamburger maker and an electric wok.
2. Have the patience to read till I understand the instruction manuals of my brand new VCR, my year old knife sharpener, my two-year-old word processor and my six-year-old Cuisinart.
3. Call repairmen to fix my hanging oven door, to replace the slate tiles on the walkway into my house, to "kick" my bedroom carpeting, to rewire my electricity so two people can use hair dryers at the same time, to fix a sick barbecue grill—all of which have been in this state of disrepair for at least six months.
4. Make appointments for the cat to see the vet, my daughter to see the dentist, my husband to have a five year overdue physical, myself to have a dermatologist look at an innocuous freckle that suddenly appears menacing.
5. Sew on the buttons from various blouses, jackets and skirts—the ones I keep mistaking for earrings since they've found a second home on the bottom of my jewelry box. While the thread is out, fix the hem on my raincoat. And my daughter's pants.
6. Make some extra sets of keys to the house so I don't have to squeeze the garage door opener into a small purse every time I go out and don't drive. Or bother my neighbor at midnight. Or throw stones at the bedroom window to wake a sleeping husband. (All of which I've been doing for the last three years.)
7. Buy a new set of glasses so in case someone I don't want to drink out of a Giants glass comes over and gets thirsty, I'm not horrified. Stop waiting to redo the kitchen before making this substantial investment.
8. Write the letters I swore I would to the airline that was so rude and unhelpful and the company that said it was OK to wash (instead of dry clean) that expensive new sweater.
9. Visit—or at least call—lonely, elderly, depressed, guilt invoking great Aunt Molly.
10. Go back to Weight Watchers.

I changed my mind. There's not a chance I'd ever live through such a day. If I had that extra day a month, I'd pray for the mental health to get a massage, watch *Gone With The Wind*, bake chocolate chip cookies and take a long, long bubble bath. I wouldn't do one thing just to "Knock it off" the list or alleviate guilt. I'd give myself permission to accomplish nothing but feeling good. That's really what I should do. Right after I finish writing the book I just started dreaming about.

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