



New York Times Bestselling Author
JAMES MICHAEL PRATT

MOM, The Woman Who Made Oatmeal Stick to My Ribs

by

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New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

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General

MOM, The Woman Who Made Oatmeal Stick to My Ribs

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CHAPTER ONE

Appreciation for Everyday Moms



“Youth fades, love drops, the leaves of friendship fall; a mother’s secret hope outlives them all!”

~Oliver Wendall Holmes

I figure my mom was pretty much typical of mothers of her generation. The daughter of a mother who had been born in the late 1800s, Mom had inherited a set of values and moral teachings that were almost universally accepted in America in the years when my parents were raising me and my siblings.

Mom did her best to instill in her children, who were born in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, those virtues that she was confident would bring us success and happiness and ensure we would be honest, decent citizens.

Mom had seven sons and two daughters. Later in life, she also adopted an adult – my third sister. In her selfless devotion to our family, Mom lived the values she was trying to instill in her children.

Like millions of moms her age, Mom grew up in the milieu of the Great Depression of the 1930s, waited for her soldier boyfriend to come home from World War Two, the world's greatest military conflict of all time, and denied herself comforts unknown to previous generations in favor of her children having the best she could provide.

That selflessness is the chief characteristic of mothers, and it is one of the reasons why our mothers occupy such a lofty place in our memories. "Mom" is the sacred and affectionate title we reserve for the woman who gave us life, the woman who we know best, the woman who always put our needs above her own. That selflessness alone qualifies moms for sainthood.

The memories described in this book not only illustrate my mother's virtues but also recognize the goodness of all mothers. I am sure my memories are typical of the stories you could tell about the ways your mother blessed and shaped your character through her teachings and example.

But my mom is, after all, the only mom I have had direct experience with. Remembering and writing down these things has been fun and given me an even greater appreciation for my mother and the direction she pointed me in life. My hope is that my experiences with her will be of interest to you and cause you to reflect with gratitude on your unique relationship with your own mother.

If by chance you did not have a positive experience and missed growing up under the protective wings of an angel mother, I offer you mine, hoping you might find in her example the inspiration to more fully appreciate your own mother. If you are a mother, perhaps you'll discover something in my mom's approach to childrearing that will inspire and encourage you in your own selfless work to shape and mold your children's characters.

Mom, we can never say "thank you" enough. These words pay tribute to you and all the everyday mothers who build the world, one soul at a time!

CHAPTER TWO

The Woman Who Made Oatmeal Stick to My Ribs



“Sometimes the strength of motherhood is greater than natural laws.”

~Barbara Kingsolver, Novelist

Wholesome goodness is what moms are all about. What mom hasn't gotten up before her children to make sure they were nourished and ready for the world?

“I'm late. I don't have time to eat,” we say.

“You can't go to school without something in your stomach,” our moms counter.

And so we take a hurried moment to bolt down what she has prepared.

Behind the rib cage, close to that stomach that each morning anticipates breaking the nightly fast, is the heart. All moms know that the heart needs nourishment too. In fact, until the stomach is filled, the heart cannot patiently endure Mom's loving counsel. So, mothers wisely feed first and teach second.

I grew up under the wings of a woman whose outlook had been shaped by conditions she had lived through in the Great Depression. Economic hard times had been both a cruel and a thorough schoolmaster, and Mom's attitude toward education, health, morals, and provident living was the product of real and often harsh experience. There are many such lessons of life and values I learned from her, which I now recall as I watch her slip into old age, a new age of mothering, as shocking a realization to me as it is to her. But she is still here and still giving guidance—still reminding me to eat correctly, be safe, and say my prayers.

"M'm, m'm, good!" That famous jingle originating in 1931 still rings in my ears after all these years. In fact, if life on earth were snuffed out, and travelers from a distant planet arrived seeking to understand how we had lived and what caused our demise, they might draw a conclusion or two from what they would find in America's pantries.

There they would doubtless discover several cans of Campbell's Soup, a brand that could be called "America's Official Soup" because it is so ubiquitous. The other item most likely to be discovered would be round, cardboard canisters of oatmeal.

An alien arriving from deep outer space, landing on an earth devoid of living human beings, might radio these initial findings back to his superiors on the mother ship:

"It would seem that the American humans subsisted mainly on two foods. One of them is a liquid mixed with a variety of plant and animal parts. The other is a dry, dusty meal that one can only assume would be hard to swallow. In fact, if eaten in the quantities it appears to have been consumed, it might well be one of the chief killers of this civilization."

"Explain your conclusion."

"The dusty meal appears to be almost inedible, due to its dry nature. One would almost certainly choke and die from asphyxiation, unless the meal were mixed with some form of liquid, perhaps the soupy liquid found in the cans."

"And you say this dry meal is to be found in almost every dwelling?"

"Yes, Commander. And it appears to come from a single, central source."

"Explain."

"Each of the containers of this flat, grainy substance displays the likeness of a - round-faced, rosy cheeked, white-haired, and cheerful-looking male, wearing a black cloak and a broad brimmed head covering of some type. A *hat*, I believe the former inhabitants called it."

"And this *hat* would signify leadership of the American tribe?"

"It appears so. No doubt they respected him greatly, for his image is always found on these containers of what they called 'Quaker Oats.'"

"We shall call it *oatmeal*, for the record," the commander responds. "Is there any way of knowing what may have induced the inhabitants to consume this dry meal in such large amounts?"

"Perhaps. In one habitation, we found a written message next to the carton containing the dry food."

"A communication?" the commander in the mother ship responds excitedly. "It might contain valuable, even secret information—perhaps from the happy male himself—their leader," he adds.

"Yes, Commander. Or might I suggest this message comes from the feminine side of the race. Everywhere, we find images of these American females preparing foodstuffs."

"Then a message from a female American to the happy man you described?"

"That may be so. Shall I send the message to you through our portable translation screen?"

"Proceed."

"Scanning." The alien on the ground passes the note through the handheld device, beaming it up to the command ship.

The words pop up on the screen before the alien commander, seated at the control console of the command ship. He reads: "*Jimmy. Don't forget to eat your oatmeal. It will stick to your ribs. Love, Mom.*"

In illustrating a truth, sometimes it is useful to take something to the absurd. Mom was not sophisticated, but she had the knack of unconsciously using metaphors to communicate her teachings. The oatmeal speech she frequently gave us is one such example. In her desire to fortify us against the day ahead, Mom would often say, just as the imaginary mother above, "Eat your oatmeal, children. It will stick to your ribs."

My younger brother, Rex, the brother I grew up closest to—you know, the one you blame for the mischief you get into, cheat at board games, take advantage of and ask to test the cold water of the swimming pool first—was in the hospital a few years back, awaiting major surgery that would take the surgeon through his rib cage.

I had promised that our family would pray for him, and I called him to let him know I was aware of his needs the hour before the surgery was to take place. He was in a well-known Los Angeles hospital, and I had expected merely to leave a message for him. Somewhat sedated from the effects of prep drugs, my brother personally picked up the phone in his private room. Our conversation went something like this:

"So, Rex, you worried?"

"No . . . not . . . really . . ."

"I'm praying for you."

"Oh . . . well, uh, I'm . . . kinda . . . drug . . . ged . . . right now."

"Well, I know everything will go well."

"Oh . . . O . . . kay . . ." he slurred as the drugs took greater effect. "I'd . . . bet . . . ter . . . go . . . now," he added, drifting away from the conversation.

"Can you do something for me?" I asked.

"What?" he demanded, but as kindly as he could under the circumstances.

"Ask the doctors a question when you come out of recovery."

"What?"

"Ask them if they found any oatmeal."

"What?" he squeaked out. "I got...ta go. Bye."

"Bye. Love you, Brother."

Click.

The surgery was a success, and when I called Rex the next day to check on him, I just assumed he would remember our pre-operation conversation of the day before.

"So," I said. "The prayers worked."

"Yeah. Guess so," he answered.

"You ask the doctors the question?"

"What question?"

"You know. They cut through your ribs to get to that gland and fix it, right?"

"Yeah . . . so?"

"So did they find what I asked you to have them look for?"

"Jim, what are you talking about?"

"Oatmeal. Did they find any oatmeal stuck to your ribs?"

Silence.

Rex was still under the influence of the drugs he had been given and wasn't yet thinking clearly, so I let him off the hook.

"Talk to you later," I said. "We are remembering you in our prayers. But ask the doctors for me, will you?"

"Yeah . . . sure. 'Bye."

Click.

See, Mom never lied. Unlike our Dad, who lied to get into World Ward II so he could save the planet, Mom always told the truth. I'm not sure if she ever mentioned it to any of her other children, but Mom definitely had always told me when I lived at home: "Jimmy, eat your oatmeal, it'll stick to your ribs . . ."

Today my own kitchen cabinets are full of oatmeal—all flavors. I still eat the stuff regularly. But I never quite understood what Mom meant by it "sticking to my ribs." I have never asked either; I just assumed if she said it would stick, then it would.

I recall as a boy feeling around my ribcage after eating my oatmeal and wondering if it took a trip other food didn't. Maybe oatmeal really did hang out down there.

"And it'll keep you warm," Mom would add, an assurance that eating the entire bowl would be good for me.

See, I trust Mom. So, I had never in my life, not even to this day, in my fifth decade, asked why she thought oatmeal, above all other foods, would adhere to my ribs instead of becoming digested in the normal way.

The idea that I took from Mom, especially when I was living thousands of miles away from home in South America, and eating almost daily a soupy gruel of watered-down, cooked oats for breakfast (consumed as a drink rather than a thick porridge) was that oatmeal was good for me and that it would also somehow keep me safe. It was a comforting thing. Whenever I brought the cup of warm, soupy oat drink to my lips, Mom was there with me.

As I think on it now, the oatmeal must have comforted Mom too. She just needed to know that something she did would stick to us away from home, when we seven boys and two girls ventured out into the cold, hard world.

Oatmeal might not literally stick to ribs, but I never, ever, eat it without hearing Mom's voice. So, it wasn't just the oatmeal that stuck to this boy. The porridge was a symbol of something else that would stay with me—her love and pride in me and the time-tested values she taught, which provided real warmth and a shield against the punch's life would deliver. Obeying Mom by eating the hot cereal was a way of assuring myself that I could succeed.

Mom always got it right, because she always gave the best. There are no perfect moms or dads, any more than there are perfect children; but some moms come pretty close. After all is said and done, knowing Mom cares makes a boy feel safe.

And as for the oatmeal, every time I eat it, I smile and think about it sticking to my ribs in a special way, a way that causes me to silently say:

"Thanks, Mom. Your warmth and caring stuck where it matters most, and it still is protecting my heart!"

PS: Rex and I beat the recent 2020-2023 pandemic. We think it was the oatmeal.

CHAPTER 3

“Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them Do Unto You”



“I think it must somewhere be written, that the virtues of the mothers are visited upon the children.”

~Charles Dickens

The Golden Rule is perhaps the most commonly known and widely accepted standard for personal behavior that exists on the planet. This notion of treating others as you would like to be treated is the foundation of every moral and law-abiding civilization known. Imagine the wonderful effect it would have in the world if everyone lived by that simple maxim. Ours would be a civilization devoid of war, crime, famine, and even many diseases, along with a host of other social ills.

It might sound simplistic, and it might seem a cliché, but the best policy is and always has been to consider how you would like to be treated before dealing with - another.

Mom tried to instill that mentality in her sons. Based on her own experience, she knew that we boys would likely grow up to witness war and even face devastating hunger, illness, and various privations. She also knew that *The Golden Rule* would be one of the best medicines for the negative circumstances we would encounter.

All of us are faced daily with situations that don't seem quite right or even fair. Life offers no guarantee of evenhanded treatment. Moms worry about this, and rightly so. In the event a bully would show up or an opportunity to cheat, fib, or slip into dark and forbidden paths would come our way, Mom knew that being morally prepared would be the best answer to the challenge.

It was spring, 1965, and I was late for school.

"Remember, Jimmy, do unto . . ." she called as I raced out the door and started my run to Knolls Elementary School, ". . . others . . ." I heard halfway down the block.

"Yeah, sure, Mom," I mumbled as I waved her off. "Whatever . . ." I answered under my breath. *Why does she always have to say that? As if I don't understand or something?* I posed silently as I ran the five blocks up Christine Avenue, to see if I could squeeze into class under the tardy bell.

I liked to run. In fact, I enjoyed most sports. I was always competing and loved the challenge to my sixth-grade body to see if I could run all the way without giving in to walking. I'm pretty sure I made it to school just before the bell rang for starting classes.

It was the early 1960s, and the hills of our somewhat rural town, located just over the northern Los Angeles County line, were beginning to sprout suburban neighborhoods. It was not unusual for a new family with kids to move in every couple of weeks. I always enjoyed learning where the new kid was from and generally making friends.

Meeting these newcomers, I remembered what it was like moving to this new town. Being uprooted from established friends and familiar playgrounds had not been an easy thing for me.

Without going through any mental gyration of *why* having more friends was better than having fewer, I usually tried to make friends the first day a new boy or girl would show up. I didn't know it at the time, but looking back I can clearly see that mom's daily admonition had an irresistible effect.

So, when I noticed the new kid, Phil Perino, I decided to make a friend, to make him feel comfortable. Besides, he might come in handy after school when we chose up teams for games or playing war in the wide-open fields and rocky hills that surrounded our home.

I had another friend at Knolls Elementary who didn't have the same idea about how to greet newcomers. Mark May was a tough kid. I recalled two years earlier when he had first bullied me—given me arm burns, twisted my right arm behind my back, and administered various other minor tortures to see how much I could take. I had made a friend of him more for safety's sake than a desire to have him for a buddy. Mark liked being in charge, and I knew he would probably test my new friend, Phil, his first day at school.

During morning recess, I was standing in the ball line—the line that formed outside the sports equipment room where all kinds of balls could be checked out—footballs, basketballs, those big red bouncy rubber balls that the girls really liked in four-square games, and softballs and bats. By the time I finally got the last basketball, a crowd had gathered near the hoops.

"Hey! Stop it!" I heard Phil complain.

Uh oh, I thought, stopping dead in my tracks. The crowd grew noisier.

"Punch him, Mark," someone shouted.

"Fight back," another called.

If I just walk away and pretend I didn't see this, if I just let it go and not get involved, I won't end up with a bloody nose or worse, I thought.

The problem was that mom's words kept ringing in my ears: *Jimmy, do unto others . . . Yeah, but, Mom, this is not me doing anything wrong, it's Mark May*, I protested to the voice inside. "*. . . as you would have them do unto you*," she finished. "Ohhh . . ." I moaned as I moved forward.

"Hey! Mark!"

"Hey what, Pratt!" he called back as I broke through the crowd. Mark had Phil in the familiar arm lock and was twisting him to the ground. Tears were starting to form in the new boy's eyes.

"Leave him alone!" I said, mustering all the courage I could.

"You gonna make me?"

"Yeah. Maybe I will."

I didn't have a clue how I was going to back that up or why I had even said it. Mark was grinning from ear to ear with a look that said: "Oh, boy! Two people to beat up. This is my lucky day." He still had Phil in the arm lock.

I moved forward again. "Let him go, Mark!"

Mark's face turned from a grin into a puzzled expression.

I moved closer. "I mean it. You're gonna have to fight me too!" I said, as I put up my fists.

I could tell Mark was weighing the consequences. Maybe two scrawny kids could take him on and then he'd lose face with everyone else. If he lost face, then he'd lose power. Or worse, he'd lose face and have to answer to the principal and the long wooden paddle we all were aware that he'd become familiar with.

"Oh, go on!" he huffed, letting Phil go. "I'll get you later, Pratt!" he barked as the bell rang for recess to end.

That day I made a new friend and also reinforced a bond with Mark May that lasts until today. I don't quite understand what it is about Mark that I liked. Maybe it was because once you became his friend, he was truly loyal to the core. We had a lot of good clean fun in years to come, and though he was admittedly on the wild side with other types of friends, Mark paid me one of the ultimate compliments a few months after my twenty-first birthday.

I had recently returned home to Simi Valley, California, from South America where I had been doing volunteer work for two years, and had just spoken about my experience to our local church congregation. After the meeting I was standing outside the chapel, greeting well-wishers, when out of the corner of my eye, I saw a familiar and sturdy young man in blue jeans and T-shirt come bursting through the glass doors into the foyer.

"Jim! I heard that you were home!" Mark said as he pushed through the crowd and gave me a big hug. "Man, it's good to see you! You are the only friend who never let me down. You know that?"

I was stunned. I stammered something like, "Thanks, Mark." Then we caught up on old times. Before he left the building and I went my way in life and he his, he smiled and said, "I still wish you would have let me beat up Phil Perino." We laughed and had our little secret. Mutual respect had been earned years before. I treated both Mark and Phil how they would have wanted on that spring day in early '65, and Mom was to blame.

I was given a payday that Sunday morning that I have never forgotten. Over the years, I had remained friends with both Phil, the Italian kid whose parents had immigrated to the United States after World War Two, and with Mark, the bully.

Maybe Mom was right after all. Maybe when you treat others the way you'd like them to treat you, life pays you back in kind. Like medicine that moms spoon-feed their kids to keep them well, this simple formula for building relationships was given in doses I could swallow.

My world is a better place because of a simple prescription Mom reminded me to take, and it has worked from the inside out.

Now, as I consider those days of youth, I understand that one of the finest things Mom ever did after the oatmeal was finished was to remind me:

"Remember, son, do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

PS: It is now 2023 and Mark and I still keep in touch several times a year and remain loyal friends in our senior years. A great man, Mark is always thinking of others.

CHAPTER 4

Mom's Taxi



"A suburban mother's role is to deliver children obstetrically once, and by car forever after."

—PETER DE VRIES

I was reminded of Mom's taxi not long ago when I learned she was stranded in Idaho, needing to make the three-hour trip south to the University of Utah Medical Center for a scheduled appointment.

One of her adult children always comes through. This time it was my turn, and so I drove north the two hundred miles from my home to pay a respect to her that truly cannot be done too often.

See, Mom drove a number of taxis over the years. Her meter was always on, but the riders were never charged. I think on that now, especially as she sometimes needs someone else to be her taxi driver.

Cub Scouts, school days, dances, jobs, shopping. . . Imagine having to coordinate the comings and goings of nine children, whose birthdates were scattered between 1945 and 1962. Mom was constantly on the run, chauffeuring us from place to place. Being a taxi-mom probably never entered her mind when, as newlyweds, she and Dad bought their first car after World War II.

Our parents hadn't had the luxury of having a taxi-mom or taxi-dad when they were growing up in the 1920s and '30s, during the Great Depression. In answer to our frequent demands that we be driven here or there, they and others of their generation would always say: "When I was your age I walked, and it never killed me."

How many miles did she drive over the years to cart me and my siblings the many places we needed to be? I'm not sure it can be calculated, but the number must be in the hundreds of thousands when you consider the devotion and willingness, she showed to make sure we were everywhere we should have been.

"You kids want to go bad enough, you can walk," I remember my father saying more than once, whenever I complained that Mom couldn't immediately take me somewhere I wanted to go.

Of course, we had school buses and took those. And we had bicycles and rode those. But when the bike was down or one of the other kids had it, we were taught that there was nothing wrong with walking.

"I walked to school after I had fed the cows and milked them too. And—"

"I know, Dad, five miles, uphill both ways, and through snow with no shoes on," I would finish.

"How'd you know?" he'd counter with a smirk. "Anyway, try walking. It won't kill you." So, we weren't afraid to walk a mile or more. Unlike suburban kids today, we lived in a time when hitchhikers were still picked up without any thought of possible danger and kids were safe to walk alone or in groups on public roads. I often took the hike from our house on Christine Avenue, up to the train tracks five blocks away, and followed them with my roller skates strung over my shoulder to the skating rink on First Street in Santa Susana. It was only three to four miles away, and I never thought it was a big deal—more of an adventure.

We didn't appreciate it at the time, but when Mom could, she'd break away from a dozen other details of life to take us places: scout meetings, music lessons, school plays, and a variety of other places we needed to be.

Most kids never give a second thought to the thousands of miles his or her mom drives to get them around town during their growing-up years. In the selfishness and thoughtlessness of youth, we just expect Mom to have car keys, gas money, and time to deliver us wherever we want to be. The child sees only the right they have to the trip. A taxi-mom, on the other hand, usually sees the trip differently, viewing the service as a way to enhance her son or daughter's life in some way, while ensuring her child's safety.

"Isn't a mom *supposed* to do this?" one of my children once asked, while being driven somewhere in air-conditioned comfort.

"Maybe, but it's why she does it that matters," I answered.

Whoosh! Right over his head. That part has no meaning and won't until his children ask the same question.

I clearly recall the make and model of all of Mom's taxis. In 1962, our family's 1950-era Cadillac was an embarrassment to me. I can see it vividly—the weather-worn, blue four-door. Dad loved Cadis. They were a symbol of quality in those days and still conjure up that image in any person over forty. From my dad's point of view, to own a Cadillac, regardless of its age, was to own a fine automobile.

Never mind that ours were always ten years old by the time they came to us — they still carried significant appeal with Dad, so we were forced to ride in the heavy beasts with the distinctive taillight fins. Our 1952 model had the rounded fins, not the space-age look of the Cadis of the sixties that we would finally own in the late '70s. No, this Cadillac looked like a movie prop from the early *Superman* TV shows.

The wealthy mobster of Metropolis would drive this car after having threatened the destruction of the tallest building in town unless the ransom were paid. Then, just as the evildoer, driven by his bodyguards, was making an exit to safety, Superman would stop the speeding 1952 Cadillac with one outstretched hand. The evil man would be brought to justice.

In my nine-year-old mind that was the good part of owning the old '52 four-door. I could tie a towel around my neck, dash out in front of it, and pretend I was bringing it to a screeching halt.

I loved the *Superman* show, but in 1962 it was time to forget the past and jet into something more "hip," more "with it."

The '56 Ford and the '57 Chevy in '67 (cars I'd pay dearly to own now), the - crumpled-fender, smoke-belching, depression-era dull gray, beat-up hunk-of-metal covering a motor that may have been a Renault brand . . . these were just a few of Mom's taxis that carried us boys to the really important places of our youth.

Air-conditioning was provided by an open window, and the only safety restraints were the other kids, used as a shield during an emergency stop.

But Mom was more than the driver. She also fixed flats, changed car batteries, replaced drive belts, and even did a valve job on the '57 Chevy so Dad wouldn't have to worry about it. She was, and still is, every boy's dream taxi driver.

Mom can't drive anymore. It's not that she doesn't know how. It's just that life's challenges, brought on by age, have limited her availability. Infirmities have slowed her down and required her to "hitch" a ride rather than provide one. And it makes all of us, her children, happy to bring our taxis to her door.

I took her to her doctor's appointment this week and then back to Idaho. No matter how often I make the trip with her, even though it is a four-hour trip each way, it just doesn't seem to be long enough. I can't repay her time — those awfully embarrassing rides she gave in taxicabs of varying ages and disguises.

She cancelled the meter long ago, and I'll never know for sure how much I owe. I only know this: whatever it is she needs; I cannot do enough to repay her. She had the time for me when I didn't understand what that all meant. Now?

Mom, you have the right to ask, and I have the duty to respond.

You can ride in my taxi any time.

PS: First published in 2004, this book couldn't include the fact that Mom passed away on her birthday in 2008. Before she died, she emailed me that she had a dream that Dad was arriving on the bus at 5:12. "Jim what do you suppose that means?" She wrote. I explain in the "*Post Script – Mom's Final Chapter*" produced for this 2023 edition.

CHAPTER 5

“Eat your Food! There Are Starving Children in Africa!”



“She was ignorant of life and the world, but possessed a heart full of love.”

— HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

Ever wonder how the food you didn't eat might have gotten to the starving kids in - Africa?

Or India?

Or China?

Or South America?

Or any other place your mom implied it might have been used if you hadn't wasted it?

What our mothers employed was a great, guilt-inducing strategy. It was designed to get us to eat everything on our plate and to feel guilty if we didn't.

That compulsion not to waste food was something felt very keenly by mothers who had grown up during hard times, when food was hard to come by and simply could not be wasted. But the way Mom said it always made me feel that if I didn't clean up my plate, I was somehow responsible for the starvation of little children in some unspecified, desolate, famine-plagued foreign land.

In these early years of the twenty-first century, Americans are an increasingly overweight society. Blame for that deplorable condition has been laid at the feet of the fast-food industry. But the responsibility clearly belongs to our well-intentioned mothers. It's *their* fault! The accusing finger can now be correctly pointed where the blame belongs.

At MOM!

The day before penning this, I was at my older brother Nick's home in California. I hadn't seen him for a year, since four of us seven sons had taken a trip back to the Midwest to visit some Pratt family heritage sites.

Of the four who took that trip, three of us – Grant, Nick, and myself – had, unlike younger brother Rex, faithfully obeyed Mom when it came to eating. We looked it, too. No food was going to get wasted by any of us and make the trip overseas without us.

But Nick has a new look this year, completely unlike the old! He has lost twenty or so pounds, and the difference in his appearance is startling. He has a new image that is obviously very pleasing to him. He looks better, and he feels better.

One of his motivations to lose weight has been his stated goal to live to be a hundred and to do so with vigor. Extremely active and hardworking, Nick figures the weight loss is good for the heart.

He still eats everything on his plate, he informed me. It is just 2,000 to 3,000 fewer calories a day on his plate.

"I started a new diet over a year ago, too," I reminded him. During our trip to historic sites last year, I informed my brothers, when they asked me why I was leaving food on my plate after each meal, that it was, in fact, a new diet that I would one day proclaim to the world.

This is that day.

And the diet is called: *The Starving Child Anti-Guilt Trip Started-by-Mom Diet*. I told my brother that I hoped that it would debunk the notion that by slicking up our plates, we were helping malnourished children in every impoverished nation on earth.

My brothers laughed, humored me, and finished their meals.

Actually, I can't totally blame Mom and her generation of non-wasters. Her parents and theirs, for one hundred generations before them, were to blame, as was the experience I had while living in South America.

Back then, I was a young, twenty-year-old American male and constantly hungry. If there are two things, I remember from the twenty-two months I lived in Peru, they were being hungry and being tired. I learned from that experience to eat everything on my plate or risk going hungry until I would get another stab at a dinner. And I learned that there were really starving children in the world. Great guilt accompanied that realization.

In fact, I recall getting to the point where if I found a dead insect floating in my daily ration of soup, I would just pick it out and go on with the meal. I came to understand what my dad had always said, when referring with a laugh to his four-year experience eating World War II Army chow, occasionally flavored by an unwanted insect: "It was just more protein," and I needed to be grateful; because just outside my door were people who had even less.

So, Mom wasn't totally to blame for the girth my guilty mind had produced. I had just been conditioned by my growing boy's appetite not to waste food or opportunities to eat.

I had gotten a few pounds heavier than my "ideal weight" over the three decades I had officially been an adult. In fact, gaining just a tad over ten extra pounds for every decade, I had ballooned up in ways that were startlingly evident in the mirror or recent photographs. Oh, I had tried several fad diets over the years and had started a number of aborted exercise programs, but I had not done enough to curtail my gradual weight gain.

Surrendering to the fact that there were simply some foods I liked and had no intention of giving up, I was seated in a diner during a business trip one day years ago, determined to listen to my mom. The voice in my head kept nagging me:

“Jimmy, finish your food. Remember the starving children in Africa!”

“Yes, Mom,” I would answer as I dutifully shoveled the remaining bites into my mouth, over the protests of my uncomfortable midsection.

I later sat in another diner, on the Missouri River near St. Louis, explaining to my three smiling brothers my epiphany. I told them of the moment I finally rebelled against Mom and her vision of feeding the world.

It was somewhere in the South, in some hotel restaurant. I was cramming fritters or chicken-in-gravy-somethings into my mouth, knowing that I shouldn’t disappoint my mom. It was as if she were standing over me, observing me eat, compelling me to clean off my plate. But I had reached the point where I didn’t think I could take another bite, and I was struggling to finish the down-home portion I had been served.

I was in my mid-forties at the time and still thoroughly obedient to Mom’s voice from my youth. There was no way on earth I would let her down or go back on the resolve I had made during my younger years in Peru — that if I ever got back to the United States (one of my best friends died doing what I was doing, and three more friends would in coming years) — I would never waste a plate of food again.

So, I sucked it up (literally), sighed heavily, and angled my fork for the remaining piles on my plate. See, these Southern folks really know how to feed you, and of course, the waitress would check every few minutes (she was probably a mom too) and ask, “Is everything okay?” or, “Is the food all right?”

I couldn’t let her down, could I? I mean, what message does it send not to finish food cooked to order? It could hurt her feelings, and I didn’t want to do that.

But I had finally had enough. In spite of Mom’s nagging, my stomach protested the final few bites. I had a vision of how disgusting I looked and felt with the full face and girth I was wearing around town.

I was telling this story to my three grinning brothers, as we sat in that fabulous Missouri River restaurant just outside St. Louis, with my half-eaten plate of food in front of me.

"Mom lied," I told them.

"Huh?" Grant queried.

"Mom lied to all of us," I repeated.

"Oh, get out of here," Nick barked with a wave of his hand.

"She did," I insisted and looked at Rex who rolled his eyes.

Silence.

"Okay, what did she lie about?" Nick finally asked.

"The starving children," I answered.

"Huh?" Grant asked again.

"Children in Africa don't get what I leave on my plate. She promised all of us, that if we ate all our food the starving children would be benefited. I don't see it that way. If we eat it all, how do they get any?"

"Go on," Grant said, ever eager to learn the truth.

Nick just waved me off. Rex grinned.

"See, here I was in this restaurant in Alabama, and I wasn't starving. In fact, I was more than satisfied. But Mom was there looking over my shoulder and reminding me. Making me feel guilty."

"You took Mom with you?" Grant asked.

"He doesn't mean literally," Rex interjected.

"Oh."

Silence.

"Soooo . . . ?" Nick pressed.

"I told her, 'No.'"

"Really?" my oldest brother and namesake of our father asked with incredulity.

"Yes. I told her to go away and leave me alone."

More silence.

"Want to know what I did?" I asked. I love playing the fool for my brothers, though they would tell you I really don't need the practice.

"I told Mom that if I finished all my food, there would, in fact, be none for any children anywhere and that I would never again listen to her or believe her on this issue!"

"What did she say?" Grant asked with a laugh as he turned up his hearing-aid dial a notch.

"She left and has never bothered me again. I think she is mad at me or something."

We all had a good laugh and then enjoyed an hour of small talk about growing up, the nonsense of my logic, and such.

But truly . . . I had rebelled against Mom's premise!

I knew at thirty pounds beyond my normal blood pressure weight that Mom meant well—all moms do. But wasting the food on my plate would not benefit one single child who was going hungry!

It had become clear to me what I should do: rather than worrying about wasting unneeded food, I would simply eat only half of it. And then, someday, I might even consider changing the kinds of food I eat.

I know Mom never meant to lie, just inspire. She was only doing what mothers had promised for generations before her, that by eating everything she had so arduously gathered, managed to pull from the ground, the cow, the goat, or wherever, then prepared, that their children would not starve, that they would be okay. Motivated by motherly instinct and by her love and concern for me, Mom had implied something that wasn't true.

As we wandered back to our hotel, I think Mom was on all of our minds. We were in midlife and full of appreciation for our parents. Many of our children were now entering their own adulthood, and we knew we had certainly perpetuated the same frugality-based motivation Mom told us: "*Eat all your food! There are starving children in Africa.*"

Well, to the world's shame, there *are* starving children in far too many places. We burn crops and pay farmers not to grow them in the United States so that we can keep prices up.

We could feed the world today—certainly most of it anyway—just from the uneaten portions left on plates like mine as I dine out. I try not to feel guilty about it. I do participate in contributing funds to ease and alleviate the suffering of the poor. I wish my new diet could literally help, that foods wasted were indeed not. I really do. But it causes me to refocus regularly on the goodness of mothers who strive to care for, feed, and nourish their children.

Moms everywhere are God's right arm. The compulsion to encourage finishing, not wasting, and eating well, has derived from centuries of knowing that recurring scarcity, droughts, plagues, and economic disasters can and do literally take food off the table.

In her anxiety to nurture and nourish, our mother broke her own rule and told us a lie. We know it now. Nothing we waste on our plates can get to Africa to feed someone else's child. But Mom's frugality and her determination to never waste, borne of what she had endured in the Great Depression, are important for us to consider today. We have become a throw-away society, much to the dismay of Mom and mothers everywhere.

We may not be able to transport our uneaten portions overseas to help out other mothers who are filled with anxiety for their starving children's survival, but we can do something about it. We can donate, give, and help those mothers with our surplus wealth. There are charitable organizations we could support by cutting back on half of what we see piled so high on our dinner plates. A dollar a day will go a long way in countries where the head of the house earns that. Why not find a charitable organization that can offer food and clothing to desperate mothers and fathers in other lands?

Mom, thanks for your care. I know there are starving children in the world; I've seen it.

And because of you I am doing something about it!

CHAPTER 6

“We’re Gonna Eat Who?”



“My mother had a great deal of trouble with me, but I think she enjoyed it.”

~Mark Twain

My parents, children of a more rural America, were used to eating and canning what their families grew in the garden, raising animals for fresh meat, milking cows and goats, and collecting eggs from the chickens. The few groceries they may have bought from a store merely supplemented their homegrown and home-produced food.

It was not until the 1950s and the growth of the food manufacturing and distribution industries, coupled with new media technologies (such as television) for enhanced advertising, that prepackaged foods became popular in this country. The convenience of prepared foods ultimately turned the family garden in this country into a quaint relic from the past. Nowadays, only in agricultural America are you likely to find a family eating freshly shucked corn or vegetables harvested that morning and using cream skimmed from fresh milk and butter made from that day's dairy production. And the truth is, for the sake of convenience, most contemporary farm families also buy and use prepared foods, rather than go to the trouble of processing something from their garden, orchard, or flock.

For a few of us (those who are older) the freshness of homegrown food and the satisfaction of bringing it directly from the garden to the table is only a distant memory, distorted no doubt by the passage of time. We forget how hard and monotonous the work was and how old-fashioned and embarrassing it seemed for us modern kids to have to do farm work.

For the vast majority of young Americans, that long-ago practice of producing your own food is now as hard to fathom as it is to imagine living without cell phones or e-mail. Most of today's urban children have no idea that the serving of Chicken McNuggets in their "Happy Meal" was made possible by the recent slaughter of a chicken that otherwise might be clucking and scratching in the dirt of some farmyard.

I constantly badger my wife to be allowed to look for land far from the city, a place to grow our own food, or even grow food to give away. See, growing something takes time, and time invested in something as meaningful as good health and hard work is time well invested.

Circumstances and modern life conspired to prevent me from giving my own children the experience of preparing soil, planting, watering, weeding, and harvesting the results, as well as caring for animals, but my parents, and especially Mom, certainly did not fail to do so for me.

A few years ago, when my son was in his early teens, we were riding together in the car not far from our home, when he pointed to a pasture and said, "That's a funny looking cow."

I was multitasking at the time – trying to drive and manage an open can of soda pop. But the look of amazement on his face made me turn my head to look at what he had spotted. I saw no cows in the pasture as we passed by.

"Where? I don't see any cows."

"There, Dad. Look. Over there!" he said, in an exasperated tone.

I was in the middle of swallowing a gulp of soda pop, and in my amazement, it forced its way back up and sprayed all over my lap. Choking, then half crying from sudden laughter, I pulled to the side of the road and sat there in stunned semi-awareness, trying to comprehend that Mike actually might be serious.

I was finally able to say, "You are kidding me . . . right?"

"About what?"

"You aren't kidding me, then? You really don't know what that is?" I answered, pointing to the animal he had spotted. I now felt a tinge of embarrassment, a feeling that sweeps over a parent occasionally when he knows he has failed his offspring.

"Oh, son! I have let you down! You mean . . . you're sure this isn't a joke?" I looked for any hint of a joke-meister coming back from his face.

Nothing. A blank but somewhat amused stare returned my questioning and hopeful gaze.

"That isn't a cow, Mike," I moaned. I wasn't sure if it was proper to cry now. I just looked up and out my car window into the blue sky and questioned my Maker: *Is there something I really, really need to know about parenting? I didn't mean for things to get this far out of hand. I could use some help now.*

"Yeah, but it has horns, and it's black and white," Mike argued.

"Mama Mia," I finally let slip through a heavily released sigh. "Just because it has horns and is black and white doesn't mean it is a cow! That's a goat!"

That experience with Mike made me wonder if I hadn't shortchanged my own children by not exposing them to some of the lessons I had learned as I was growing up. We were brought up during a time when most people still understood that eggs, though they may come from the store, actually originate with a chicken; that milk isn't produced by the milkman; and that cheese has its beginnings, not in the state of Wisconsin or the homeland of the Swiss people, but in the udder of some animal. My parents, coming from a hardworking stock of rural people, saw to it that my brothers and I participated in producing at least some of the food we ate.

I admit hating it at the time. Doing farm type chores wasn't exactly the cool thing to do during the hip '60s in suburban Southern California. Not even Wally or Beaver from *Leave It to Beaver*, or redhead Opie from *The Andy Griffith Show*, had to milk cows. Only a few other kids in our neighborhood had anything like farmwork to do. Maybe they were forced to mow the lawn or take out the trash, but feed animals? Milk goats? Yeah, some chickens, I suppose. It was embarrassing. I wanted my parents to stop with all this farm stuff and just let us be normal, modern people.

But for reasons that seem wise to me now, Mom and Dad gave us a chance to dirty our hands a bit—spading the ground and planting seeds, milking Jezebel, our family cow, along with a number of stubborn milking goats without names, collecting eggs, and feeding and caring for Poncho the steer and the smaller farmyard animals. Our folks made us work every day.

As I sat in my car pondering my urban son's inability to tell a goat from a cow, a sudden wave of appreciation swept over me—for Dad, but also and especially for Mom, who hadn't allowed us Pratt kids to entirely abandon our agricultural roots or miss the work ethic we learned by doing our chores.

Truthfully, I never liked goats. Still don't. While milking one, just as you would get down to the last squeeze, the stupid thing would deliberately put her hind foot, encrusted with pasture droppings and mud, in the bucket—just to say “thank you” for milking her. As a boy I imagined that was why milk had to be “pasteurized,” until I was taught in seventh-grade science about French scientist Louie Pasteur who invented the pasteurization process.

But we knew that Mom meant business when she gave out our assigned chores. She was convinced that one of my younger brothers was allergic to cows' milk, and though I wasn't sure that was true I tried not to complain too loudly about having to milk the goats. I had no alternative but to go along, if I wanted my taxi rides around town.

Poncho was one of several steers we raised during my growing-up years. The idea was to fatten him up and then have him slaughtered. It was always a bit hard knowing the animal you fed would feed you one day. I never quite got used to that.

But Poncho, he was a rare one. He came to us already weaned (and spoiled) from the folks who raised him. He was like a big pet and enjoyed “hanging out” with his owners. He would frequently find a way out of his pen and even tried to get into the house through the back door.

Because of his pesky ways—breaking out of his pen, tromping through the gardens, and leaving “cow pies” on the lawns—Poncho often made Mom angry. That was something he shared with us boys—my brothers and I often made Mom angry, too. Kids and steers have a lot in common. They are hard to keep track of, and keep in line, and are constantly on the lookout for something to eat.

We eventually gave up trying to keep Poncho in his pen and ended up moving him from pasture to pasture and finally a few miles to the other side of town to see if he'd quit trying to “hang out” and be human.

See, we all knew his destiny. We didn't want to say it, and we certainly weren't going to let him know, but he was growing fat and ready for the table. I really did not want to see that happen. In fact, as a twelve-year-old boy, I had gotten so used to his antics and personality that I kind of liked the lug. I looked forward to coming home from school and having him mosey to the barbed-wire fence and hang his head over to be scratched.

On one occasion, Mom had taken all she was going to take from Poncho. "Jimmy, get your shoes on and get in the car. We've got to go down to Royal Avenue. Poncho got out and is bothering someone." She got a rope, and we piled into the station wagon.

When we arrived at the place where someone had complained, we found Poncho contentedly munching on their backyard grass. So, we roped him and tied him to the bumper. Then Mom taught him a little lesson by putting her foot to the gas pedal.

Poncho bellowed but kept up. He might have lost a pound or two, but was soon back in his corral. As we were patching the hole he had created in the fence, Mom said, "Poncho, you keep this up and I swear..." She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to. I raised my eyebrow and gave Poncho the *You better not mess with Mom if you know what's good for you* look.

It wasn't long afterward, that one of my younger brothers came running up the street toward me as I walked home from school.

"Mom called the butcher! You better hurry if you want to see Poncho!"

Poncho had apparently created some kind of havoc at the hired-out pasture, and Mom had to bring him to the field across from our house. He had seemed to be cooperating lately, and I figured Poncho would just keep being Poncho.

"No!" I remember crying aloud as I took off.

As I ran through the front door, I saw my older brother, Nick, grinning.

"Guess we're having steak tonight," he said.

I hurried out back and across the ditch to the field, and there under a tarp was a hide, a head, and well--Poncho's outline. I was not pleased and decided to have a talk with Mom. But before I could say anything, she said, "Jimmy, do you think Mrs. Perino would like some beef? Why don't you go ask her?"

I had a word or two with Mom that she couldn't hear and sullenly walked up the street to the Perino's house. They were Italian and ate parts of a cow I had never before heard of people eating.

I explained the situation to my friend Phil, and his mother came out with the family picnic cooler. "The brains and heart. And tell your mother thank you!" she said with her warm but strong Italian accent.

Well, I was a bit more disturbed than before. I took the cooler home, Mom took care of the rest, and as I carried the cooler back, I had a talk with the best parts of Poncho. "You numbskull! I told you not to mess around and be so bull-headed with Mom. Look where it got you!"

My parents taught me a lot about animals, where food comes from, and how to grow our own. I regret my son can't tell a goat from a cow and pray there will always be a grocery store in operation for as long as he lives.

Just as important as learning to work and how to be responsible, were the lessons Mom taught us about respecting life, gratefully using God's creations to sustain ourselves, and accepting the stewardship we had been given over the earth and all it can provide.

As for Poncho, he was hard to swallow. What he should have learned was, *If you know what's good for you, don't say "no" to Mom.* Guess he should have listened like the rest of us. He might have lived longer.

Thanks, Mom, for teaching the values of work and of all God's creations. The lessons you taught me about industry and provident living are with me still.

GRATEFUL TO SHARE THIS 6 CHAPTER EXPERIENCE OF LIFE WITH MOM WITH YOU!

I will be sending the full ebook in PDF to you by April 1st as my way of saying “Thanks” for trusting me and my work, especially the novels, while also asking this as a favor of you...

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