

Mothers and Daughters

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We left Taiwan when I was three years old – my father, mother, and little sister – and made our home in San Diego, California. Ours was the typical immigrant story: off to America in search of a better life, better opportunities for the children, and freedom to worship as one pleased. My parents came for all these reasons, but mainly to worship God as they had forsaken their Buddhist upbringings and became Christians during their teen years. My father worked as an engineer during the week and preached at a Chinese church on weekends. Eventually he left his engineering job and my siblings and I became PK's.

My mother stayed home. I have a few memories of her during my childhood, mostly revolving around food: squeezing fresh soy milk, preparing dumplings, raising and killing chickens in our backyard, digging for clams in Mission Bay, gutting fish my father caught on the weekends and shopping for groceries at Whoo Chee Chong. But I don't remember one conversation I had with my mother, not one. Even when my grandmother came to visit, there was silence. I do not remember hearing them talk or for that matter, seeing them talk. There was tension in the house, and my grandmother always seemed angry and my mother seemed sad and afraid. Grandmother only visited us twice before she died. I never knew her and that was all right because we were all afraid of her anyway.

One Saturday morning, at the age of ten, I woke up with tremendous pain in my stomach. It was also the morning of my dreaded Chinese School class (my sister and I attended this twice a week after American School). Thinking I was faking the pain, my parents reprimanded me and left me to writhe in my bed all morning. After a few hours they returned to find me still in pain and decided to take me to the hospital. They found a tumor mass weighing five pounds wrapped around my right ovary. Surgery was performed within days and afterwards chemotherapy was prescribed.

All of this was done without communication. We, I, simply went through the motions. It had to be done. No questions asked. No explanations given. I simply submitted to everything asked of me. But inside my mind and heart, I was confused and scared. I had no understanding of hospital procedures and especially this word I had never heard – chemotherapy. I was not told that the tumor was cancerous (in fact, I was 35 years old when I discovered the diagnosis – ovarian cancer). For years, my parents had simply told me it was a benign tumor and because of the large size, chemotherapy was needed to treat it. I believed this with all my heart and had convinced many doctors over the years to believe this too, except for one.

¹²⁹ Elsie Kirchhofer has had a powerful ministry using the story and poem as tools to disciple women in her community, church and abroad.

Alone

That Sunday morning
Etched in my memory
Forever
One stroke of the brush
A clump of hair
Scared out of my mind
No idea what...was...happening
Loneliness seeping in

Mom, you cut off all my hair that
morning
You didn't explain
You never warned me
My long locks gone
A bald little girl weeping on her bed
You left me there to cry
You left me alone

Shopping at Sears for a wig
Any would do
I did not understand what was
happening
You sent me to school the next day
I was ashamed
So ashamed
To face the kids
You left me alone

I was teased
Mocked, harassed
Boys spit into my wig
I went to the bathroom
and sobbed
You left me alone

More chemo
One week per month in the hospital
You never visited me
I wanted you, Mom
You left me alone

Desperate cry for help – a full tantrum
Destroying my room
You did not come
I was so alone, Mom
Why didn't you come?

At home
Siblings afraid of my bald head
Sleeping in the back room
Night after night
A sad, frightened little girl
Frustrated, scared
Alone

Graduation day
6th grade
A proud moment for all but me
You took away my wig
My hair
2 inches long, all around
Wig tan on my forehead
I was completely ashamed
You made me graduate like that
No pictures
I was so ashamed
I was alone

That day you cut off my hair
Mom, that was the day you left me
That was the day I lost my mom
And I was alone
In this big world

Now I am 40
I am not alone anymore
No, I am not alone
But I miss you, Mom
I missed you all my life

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That was the beginning of the end of my relationship with my mom. It was the beginning of starvation. In spite of all her delicious cooking, all I wanted was her love - a look of tenderness or compassion, a kiss on the forehead to tell me my hair would grow back beautifully, a squeeze of her hand to reassure me I was valued, anything really... but there was only silence. I lost what little confidence or self-esteem I had during that time. But worst of all, I lost my love for mom. I became an angry little girl.

I tried to cope during my junior high years, believing if I were obedient enough I would be loved and valued once again. Nothing changed. In high school, starved for love and acceptance and tired of performing, I started my downward journey into rebellion. I lied,

climbed out windows, and became really good at sneaking around in order to find love and acceptance in the arms of men. In college, when my parents were no longer around to control my actions, I stopped attending church. I was in pursuit of love and desperate enough to do anything to find it. No relationship lasted. I was too needy and insecure.

It was during this wandering wilderness time that I met Daniel. He was an atheist scientist doing postdoctoral studies at the La Jolla Cancer Research Foundation. I worked there as a “dishwasher,” one of three jobs I held in order to pay for school and living expenses (my parents had cut off support because of my rebellion). Meeting him was a gift from God. Little did he know how messed up, desperate and needy I was. I have no idea how or why he fell in love with me and more so, why he agreed to marry me. All I can say is this: it was God, only God, completely God. So after two and a half years we were married in San Diego on a beautiful February morning. Seven months later we moved to Switzerland, his homeland, with four suitcases, a small container of furniture, and a baby on the way – I was hoping for a son (*please God, not a girl; I don't know how to be the mother of a girl*).

Moving to Switzerland seemed like a fairytale come true – living in Europe, sitting on sidewalks, writing in my journal, drinking coffee and eating pastries with the man of my dreams at my side. But reality was just the opposite. September in Switzerland is the beginning of the cold season. At 4:30 pm the sun starts setting and within minutes it is dark. I couldn't drink coffee because of the pregnancy and eating pastries only added to my already large body, and Daniel worked until 6:30 pm. I was friendless, language handicapped, and completely and utterly alone. My first thought to solving this problem was finding an English speaking church – not to find God, just friends who spoke English.

That first Sunday I met a Chinese woman, the age of my mom, who had married a Swiss man. Her name is Loretta. She reminded me of my mother, very bossy and blunt. Loretta came up to me and in her direct way told me I had to go to Bible Study with her, asked for my phone number and for two weeks afterwards, called me daily and bugged me about going to Bible Study. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted friends, not Bible Study. I tried the pregnancy excuse, but that didn't work and I had no other reason. So I went with the idea of simply going once and getting her off my back.

Sitting in the pew that October morning I waited with anticipation. It was strange to be in church again and it was strange to feel a bit excited about it, although it was excitement mingled with guilt. That morning the message was John 4, the story of the woman at the well. As I sat there I knew the Lord was speaking to my heart. I was that woman. I had come to the well because I was thirsty and Jesus promised He would give me living water so I would never thirst again. As tears streamed down my face, I became the prodigal child, running to the Father's warm embrace. I was loved and accepted – finally! Of those first two years of Bible Study, I cannot recall one sermon. I simply cried my way all the way home to the Father's arms.

In His gracious way, baby steps, He repaired my heart and began the tantamount process of repairing my relationship with my mom. I began a series of apology letters, sending one every time a major incident/sin came to my mind. I never received replies, merely a phone call now and then telling me the letter was received and appreciated. It was enough. My heart was softening toward mom, and that was a good beginning. I wrote my last letter in 1998, 6 years after I started. That's when mom called and told me to stop the letters. She said the letters were no longer necessary.

I don't think my mom ever knew how much she had hurt me and I often wonder if she felt our relationship was as strained as it was. I am certain she has no idea how I felt most of my

life. But all that doesn't matter now. God used every bit of it for good, and for that I am grateful and feel especially blessed.

Mom and the Septic Tank

They say it's greener on the other side of the septic tank
But I say every cloud has a silver lining
They say the cup is half empty
But I've learned to see that it's half full

The septic tank was pretty full
Of the muck and yuck of my childhood and teenage experiences
Losing my hair under chemo treatment
 and under my mother's own hands with a pair of sewing scissors
The storm cloud brewed within my troubled lonely heart
Only to burst out in thunder and lightning
 wreaking havoc on my purity and my relationship with mom
The cup.... my heart.....empty from years of feeling I was
Unloved, undeserving, unwanted and ugly

Then, in the isolation of a Gundeli apartment, You spoke
Words of forgiveness and gently nudged me
 to forgive
Letters and phone calls
Apologies to my mom
For a lost relationship
Not accusing, just forgiving
Your miracle washing over my soul
Your hand painting in the silver lining

I'm on the other side of the septic tank
There's still yuck and muck here
But Your forgiveness has blinded my eyes to it all
And that God-painted silver lining simply outshines and diminishes
 all the dark clouds and shadows that once were in my soul
As for the cup...at times it still seems empty
But I have only to look inside and see that it is brimming with blessing

Mom, you were my septic tank
You didn't mean to be...but it happened
Yet you also brought me to Jesus
And He made me clean
I wouldn't have known I needed cleansing if not for you
So, thank you Mom

We moved back to California in 1997 with three daughters and a large container filled with furniture and a car. My mom and I were on the mend. It was not the close-knit relationship I had always dreamed of, but it was no longer restrained. There was a bridge now between the huge divide that had once been filled with hurt, bitterness and the lack of forgiveness.

Two things happened to my mom during this time. They found a brain tumor at the base of her brain. Removing her brain tumor meant shaving hair, but only a small portion at the back of her neck. However, she told the nurse to shave it all. "Hair is hair" she said, "it will grow back."

She looked so strange, my bald mother sitting at the kitchen table. I bought her hats and even offered to buy her a wig, but she refused. She would walk around bald. She had no problem with that. Hair is hair. Baldness is not a problem. That's when it hit me. Hair is simply hair. It has no meaning, no significance. For some strange reason, God opened the eyes of my heart and caused me to understand my mom. That's why she simply cut off my hair that Sunday morning. That's why she had no problem with my 6th grade graduation. That's why. I understood now, and my forgiveness could be more complete. Thank you God.

It took her a full year to recover from brain surgery. During that time I bathed her, cooked her favorite meals, was at her beck and call whenever I arrived. She told me "It is good to have a daughter. They are better than sons." A few years later, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She opted for a radical mastectomy. Except for sleeping at home at night, I lived in her hospital room for days and days. I did for her what she never could do for me. We didn't talk much. I was just there and I loved just being there for her. Once again, God was redeeming my childhood, in His most creative way...hospitals, tumors, cancer...He had not forgotten. He had planned this reunion from the beginning.

My relationship with my mother is not perfect – far from it. We will still hurt each other and I often become that little insecure girl again, but this time, only for a short time. The grace of God fortifies the bridge between us and one day there will no longer be a bridge, because that gap will be filled with Land.

When we moved to the Bay Area in 1997, we started attending Peninsula Bible Church, Cupertino. It was there that my husband asked Christ to be His Savior (December 30, 2001). It was there that my daughters found a second home. It was there that I started the intern program and was given the gift of sitting under the teaching of wonderful pastors and soaking up His Word. I learned to study the Bible like never before. After the first quarter in interns, studying Ephesians, our pastor told us to "grab some people and teach it!" I didn't really take it seriously until I went to lunch that afternoon. Sue asked about the intern program and after a lively talk she encouraged me to teach it to her and some other women. The opportunity seemed heaven-sent. That was the beginning of a sweet, sweet chapter in my life.

This initial group of six women became an anchor in my life. As I reflect now, it still amazes me how He brought us and knit us together. Since 2004, we, the *Lavish Ladies*, have studied everything I learned in the intern program. After our initial study in Ephesians, we went through the gospel of Mark. We took a break in the summer while I traveled to Romania with our church. Trying to relate to Romanian women was difficult. To make matters worse, many had not seen a Chinese woman before and they had no idea how to relate to me and even questioned my ability to be of value or interest to them. Each night in Romania we shared our spiritual story. On day three it was my turn. To my amazement, it was the power of the story that instantly bonded us - no longer Romanian and Chinese-American, but simply sisters in the Lord and in life. Upon returning to California and finishing the gospel of Mark, the Lavish Ladies spent 6 weeks sharing our stories with each other. It was a most amazing and powerful time – tears, pain, hurt, vulnerability, honesty, compassion, understanding, increased love.

In fall of 2005 we started the Psalms. As Brian Morgan had inspired and encouraged us in intern class, I did the same with the Ladies and required each of them to write a poem each week. We had God's Word as our foundation. Our stories knit us together and the poems caused us to stop and reflect, to look back and acknowledge God's hand in our life or to look forward, hoping for His hand to work wonders. At times our poetry was merely in the present, either lamenting a hardship or giving thanks for His sustaining faithfulness.

That was also the year I started writing poems about my mother. It has been a wonderful time, almost as though I were going to Bible Study therapy – a good dose of God’s Word, a safe place to open my heart, and a stage where I could share my poems to give Him glory and acknowledge His work in my life. I have written innumerable poems lamenting my lost, sometimes non-existent relationship with my mother. Through this process I have discovered two things: not one ounce of pain or grief was ever wasted in my childhood that He did not turn into a blessing or a strength; and it was no mistake that God gave me three daughters.

The birth of each daughter was beyond blessing. With the ovarian cancer, doctors warned me it would be difficult to have children. With a Chinese background, of course I wanted sons. With my strained relationship with my own mother, I was terrified of having a daughter. My own inability to connect with my mom made it hard for me to believe I could connect with a daughter. But then, God gave me three pregnancies in three years, and three daughters was no mistake. It was a God-ordained redemption plan created just for me.

Redeemed

Lord, from emptiness to fullness You have restored my life
You have brought me from famine to harvest
Changed my name from Yu-Fen, a lonely Chinese girl, to Elsie, “God is my abundance”
Thank You, Lord,
For Lydia, Julia and Vanessa
Redeeming my lost teen years
And my desire for a mother-daughter relationship –
honesty, vulnerability, fun, affection
They are my joy and delight, filling my life with both laughter and tears
They are my daughters, and friends
Thank You, Lord.

My daughters are worth more than seven sons each!
They are the redeeming embodiment of Your work on the cross
Lord, under Your wings, You have satisfied my soul.

written after studying Ruth with the *Lavish Ladies*, March 2007