

THE REAL SIDE OF MOTHERS

By David Irvine, Best-Selling Author and Leader's Navigator

I suppose it goes without saying that I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for my mother, Joyce Irvine. But I also would not be who I am today were it not for my mother.

The vital impact she had on me as a mentor, teacher, guide, and healer came from the strength of something that lay beyond all those roles.

Soon after Joyce's untimely death in 1999, my sister and I were cleaning out her condominium and discovered a worn-out box on the upper shelf of one of her closets. Curious to see what might be inside, we opened it to find hundreds of tattered letters. As we sat and started poring through them, we soon realized that these were piles of love letters written to Joyce by her young husband, Ted Harling, from the cockpit of a Lancaster Bomber over a war-torn Europe where he served as a flight lieutenant during World War II. Within the pile there was also a group of letters that were Joyce's letters to Ted.

A deep and sincere appreciation along with a resounding sadness swept over me as we read these letters. We realized that many of those long missives written by an exposed, loving, romantic, and anguished young war bride were actually returned to her unopened after Ted was killed in action, leaving her a two-year-old daughter to raise with no father.

There are myriad ways that a mother can impact her son or daughter's life, and something very profound happened to me the day I read my mother's love letters. I started to see that beyond the traditional concept of "mother" is a real woman with genuine emotions, passion, pain, and pleasure. We expect our mothers to be the stable rock in our lives and amidst our expectations we somehow miss the authentic humanness that lies below the surface of what we know as our "mother."

It seems strange that I didn't see this vulnerable side of my mother while she was alive. I was blind to most of her romantic side, her fearful side, her imperfect side. I also know that in her need to be a "strong" and "good" mother, she wasn't willing to expose these aspects of her personality. As for my part, I know that when she was alive I spent more energy *reacting* to her instead of *valuing* her. Now that our personalities don't block us, I am able to appreciate her with a renewed level of respect, love, and gratitude. Having survived the death of two husbands, the Great Depression, World War II, being a single parent for many years, and pioneering a career at a time when mothers were expected to stay at home, my mother was perhaps the most courageous woman I have ever known. It has taken me many years to appreciate the strength of her audacious, compassionate spirit. She was a tremendous inspiration to me.

What I offer now are three lessons from these insights:

1. Let us recognize the inner lives of our mothers. May we realize with a deeper sense of appreciation, not just the things that our mothers "did" or "do" for us or to us, but also who this woman is and was: a real human being with a real history, real needs, real dreams, real emotions, and real values. This is what we need to value most about our mothers.
2. For mothers, it is okay at times to expose your real feelings, to be more vulnerable with your children and

not be afraid to show more aspects of who you are as a person. Your children need to see this side of their mother. How can we possibly help our children deal effectively with the traumas of life if we shelter them by hiding our vulnerable side from them? They need to see us facing life honestly as they must learn to do the same.

3. For those of you who are mothers, you don't have to be perfect. You just have to be more fully human. As you come to know yourself and share this self with those you love, you will offer your children a gift of inspiration. And who knows: one day they may unwrap this gift.

For those of you who are mothers, my hope is that as you take some time out of your busy lives to tune in and attend to the humanness of the "real," authentic self that lives beyond the roles, responsibilities, and expectations that come with being a mother, you will discover more appreciation and compassion for *yourself*.

I conclude with a tribute to my mother by passing along some of her amazing wisdom I discovered in her journal, months after her death:

"Every parent, no matter how hard they try, will be both a blessing and a curse to their children. My hope is that my children will appreciate the 'blessing,' if not immediately then later in life, and perhaps more importantly that they will take the 'curse' and, like an oyster irritated by a grain of sand, over time use it as a catalyst to build layers of character and understanding—thus producing a pearl.

—Joyce Irvine

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David Irvine is sought after internationally as a speaker, author, and mentor. His work has contributed to the building of accountable, vital, and engaged organizations across North America. He is the co-founder of the Newport Institute for Authentic Living whose focus is to build authentic organizational cultures that attract and retain great people. David is the best selling author of five books. His most recent book is *Bridges Of Trust: Making Accountability Authentic*. These are available in bookstores or can be ordered at www.davidirvine.com

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