

My Dearest Mother and Me



Today, I dedicate this column to my dearest Mother, Mary Elizabeth *Catalyn* Brennen who died on January 7, 2015, at the age of 86. She impacted my life greatly. As an educator, she also influenced and molded the lives of countless Bahamian citizens.

My mother was married to Alfred Brennen for over 63 years. Interestingly, they were married on July 18, 1951 at Ebenezer Methodist Church, Shirley Street, by a pastor with an unusual name: Rev. Lovelock, a native of Canada. He certainly did lock them together and threw away the key. This marriage yielded four children, and I am the only son. What is so special to me is that my dearest mother treated me, the only boy, the same way she did her three daughters. The skills she taught her daughters, she taught me also. Curfews and social privileges were no different among us. I did not have special or extended privileges because I was a boy. We

all had to come home the same time.

CREATIVITY

I could never forget the day Mom called me to sit beside her at the Singer sewing machine. That was the first day of many days she began patiently teaching me the different kinds of stitches, how to hem, put on buttons, install a zipper, knit, pom-pom, thread a sewing machine, etc. She would lovingly show me the chain stitch, straight stitch, underhand stitch, and overhand stitch. I am happy she did that. She taught me that a man need not depend on a woman to do simple things or anything if he has the skill to do it. She taught me that I must not treat my wife as a maid by demanding that she do things for me. Today, although I am not able to truly craft a dress or pair of pants, I am really good at making adjustments and mending. In fact, at times I am my wife's chief consultant when she makes dresses. Thanks to my dearest mother. I have never made Annick feel that she was required to do something for me simply because she was a woman. Thanks to my dearest mother, Mary.

I acquired the paper art skills from my mother. She loved decorating anything. She not only decorated classroom walls, but books and fabrics. She was magnificent.

IN THE KITCHEN

How can I forget her culinary skills? When it comes to cooking and baking, all the children were "required" to cook and bake. Using an ancient-of-days kerosene old stove and a top-of-the-stove portable baking oven, Mother taught me and my sisters how to make tasty meals, cakes, breads, and her famous Johnny and Bennie cakes. Oh, I cannot leave out the guava and raisin duffs. By the time I was in my early teens, my treat was to cook breakfast every Sunday morning for the entire family. The cottage-cheese salads garnished with

diced apples and raisins, grilled cheese sliced bread, pancakes, scrambled eggs, etc, were some of my specialties.

We were all vegetarians and ironically, I did not like peas and beans. Mother knew the nutritional value of peas and beans and got me to eat them by making peas and beans patties and pancakes. They were delicious. Today I love peas and beans. They are like candy to me. That's a creative mother. Her great cooking and creativity in the kitchen led her to become a much-demanded caterer at many weddings and social functions. As children we would stay up late at nights delicately cutting the dark brown edges off each slice of bread. She taught us that gourmet sandwiches were not made with the bread edges on them. I cannot leave out the Saturday night church socials and the corn fritters, corn dogs, and "veggie conch" salad; all her creations. Summer youth camp leaders demanded her presence in the camp kitchen every year for decades. As camp matron, she would lovingly get up in the early morning hours to cook breakfast, with the help of her team, for almost 200 campers. This was all a labor love.

SOCIAL AND SEX LIFE

What was most exiting to me as a young child was when I first saw my mother and father kiss on the lips. Wow! That was special. In fact I jumped for joy as though I was saying "do it again mom and dad." That was my first lesson in sex education. My mother and father were very concerned that her children received the proper knowledge about sex, love, and social life. Young men who were interested in having a relationship with my sisters were not turned off, but were instead guided by my parents. My dearest mother would tell us all that our friends could come to visit us at the home, but they had to come inside the house to talk with us. There was to be no lingering in the streets or around the corners of the house. When we went to social events we were advised to remain with the crowd. Do not sneak around dark corners. We were to protect our own dignity by keeping "everything in the light." As a result of that I developed a philosophy that governed my life as a young man and still does today in a real sense. Here it is: If I could not do something in my parents' presence, I could not do it behind their backs. That included kissing a girl. Perhaps that is why I never kissed one until I met my wife, Annick.



As you can see, sex education began very early in the Brennen family. My mother and father held nothing back from us. We had long discussion sessions about sex, boyfriend, and girlfriend matters. Most interestingly, my dearest mother kept her contraceptive in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom for years. She was waiting for the right time to talk with

us about sex by showing us the diaphragm she used as a contraceptive. Of course, we asked questions. Yes, it was a stimulating discussion. More importantly, she taught us it was better to wait until after you say "I do" before you engaged in sexual intercourse.

PUPPY LOVE

My dearest mother understood how "puppy love" worked in the heads of little children. When I was five years old, I asked my first grade teacher (more than 25 years older) to marry me. I was "in love" with her. I begged her to wait for me when I get older so we could get married. I would sneak under her desk and kiss her feet. I would hide behind the door after class to wait for her and rush to her to help her take her books to the car. My mother never condemned or criticized my "love affair" with Miss Blake, a native of Jamaica. She understood how tiny little hearts of boys work when it comes to love. My dearest mother would smile and sometimes even went along with the "affair." It is so special to recall. She did not condemn me and say words like "shut up you stupid boy" or "that's a silly thing to say." Her responses were always sensitive and understanding. That's a great mother. She knew I would grow out of it.

We were so open in our family about love and relationships, that my parents knew every female I had a crush, especially Mother. When I was in Jamaica studying at Northern Caribbean University, I would write long epistles to Mother about any relationship, romantic or casual, I had with females.

THE BEST TEACHER

She was the best Grade 1 teacher in The Bahamas for decades. She was patient, caring, understanding, and motherly to every child in her classroom. The child who could not read well would be inspired to read because of my dearest mother's genuine interest in making sure that every child succeeds. She would take the time, with crafted phonic and word cards created by her own hands, to unwearingly tutor any child who needed help. The child who fell and bruised her knee was quickly nursed by my mother's tender hands. She was the self-made campus nurse. Alcohol or mercurochrome was rubbed under Band-Aids or gauzes on the bruised skin of countless students. If you wanted your pain to go away, just let "Mrs. Brennen treat it for you."



These are fond memories of my dearest mother. Time and space would not allow me to fully express the impact she had on me, my sisters, and countless citizens of our country. "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all. Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Give her the reward she has earned, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate" (Proverbs 31).

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