

** He was a hard working man, with impeccable work ethic and discipline, who bent over backwards to provide for his family. He was a skilled carpenter by trade, and took pride in his work. He achieved his share of success in the construction business, and he never forgot the blood, sweat and tears it took him to get there. This was evident when I saw him, time and again, lend a hand to those less fortunate: The doorbell rings, a man at the door, a quick conversation with my father, my father goes inside, comes back out, hands over some money to the man. Often were the times I saw my dad give advances to his employees when they needed it, or hear him mention to my mother his hiring of people when he didn’t need them just to get them on their feet. I so admired him for that.

His favorite past-time was baseball. And when my sister turned out too girly and my brother too hobby involved, he didn’t hesitate to grab his youngest child and teach her everything there was to learn about the sport. In the seventies and early eighties he took me to many games at the old Miami Stadium in northwest Miami, where I saw the likes of Steve Garvey and the rest of Tommy Lasorda’s Dodgers, along with Pete Rose and the Big Red Machine, go head to head. I was fortunate to share with him his passion for the game right up until days before he died, smack in the middle of a heated baseball season.

From my father, I learned about work ethic, charity…and baseball.

What you know, from whom did you learn it? No, not the things we come to learn through natural skills development. I’m talking about certain character traits and abilities we pick up or learn about through social and emotional interaction, and often even while we’re not aware of it. Those things, do you know from whom? Give it some thought. I did when recently a friend and I talked about this. Our probe into our pasts brought back a lot of memories, and of course prompted me to jot down some of the things I’ve learned about from some of the most influential people in my life….

** She lost both her parents when she was still a teenager; her only sibling, my uncle, at a fairly young age; her husband in her fifties; and less than ten years later, her oldest

child…the last two to long bouts with cancer. Can you say heartache? I don't know a stronger person than my mother. She was the mastermind and driving force behind our family's exodus from Cuba — an exile in Spain that found her cooking and washing laundry by hand for our family and for other refugees we housed during our years there. Work not for the faint of heart.

Through it all, an emotional rock, wearing the strongest shield and armor, and fighting with the biggest weapon – – faith. A faith she introduced me to before I could even talk; listening to her reciting prayers at bedtime. I've witnessed her faith in action many times, but never more than during my sister's ordeal and untimely death, through which I never saw her faith absent, weaken yes, but not absent. To this day, she's a pillar in my life.

From my mother, I learned about strength and faith.

** The awful disease brought out in her a level of courage only attainable through grace. If you follow this blog at all, you've probably read about my sister and her battle with cancer. [See Scenes Everlasting]. No need to rehash the painstaking details of that here. Instead I'll tell you that I was blown away by the spiritual fortitude she exhibited. It left a mark on me, seared into my memory. I don't ever want to have to dig for that kind of courage; the thought of it scares me….

Then I saw that grace again fall upon someone else five years ago. I'll spare you the complete details, but at the tender age of six, Daniel was diagnosed with spinal cord tumors and shortly thereafter with a tethered spine condition. It was a three year battle that included three spinal cord surgeries to address and correct these conditions. He was the epitome of bravery, our son. Children in these predicaments are who God fills with courage the most, I believe, and I saw this first-hand with Danny.

From my sister, and my son I learned about courage.

** I can't recall him not sharing with me, ever. His things, his time. He's had a passion for flying since he was a boy and, by the time he was a teenager, I was his make belief co-pilot

sitting in front of a giant cockpit poster going through a flight checklist. When I was 12, I became his first real-life co-pilot when he obtained his license and realized his dream.

I don’t recall a negative word said about him, ever. His kindness overflows in everything he does. I don’t recall him not listening when I’ve needed to talk, ever. He’s been a constant figure of comfort in my life. I don’t recall fighting with my brother, ever. I think back, but only remember good memories. It’s been a dream sibling relationship.

From my brother, I learned about sharing, kindness…and flying.

** He taught me how to whistle. As I sat in the swing set in the backyard of my home in Cuba, he would stand by, while instructing me in the art of whistling. He had such patience, my grandfather. This came in very handy, as he began losing his sight at an early age from a disease that would progressively leave him blind. His resignation and patience allowed him to learn the life of a blind man. In turn, that enabled him to fend for himself better than a seeing person at times. By the time he was in his seventies, he could see but dim images, and only if he concentrated on them for a long time under direct sunlight. He would have me darken the lines of paper for him so that he could write to his sister in Cuba. Sitting at a small table under the sunlight, staring, staring, until the lines would faintly come into focus, then slowly putting pen to paper and filling the lines with words. This was a task that would take him hours. The epitome of patience! Nothing would frustrate my grandfather. Well, maybe my grandmother, HA!

Actually, one thing did frustrate him — when people lied about whether or not his socks matched. You had better tell him the truth if he asked you, because rest assured he would ask someone else and, if he found out you lied, you would get an earful from him. I learned this quickly. He would always look for me to ask me because he knew I’d tell him the truth, even if he had already left the house looking that way. He would just stay quiet, face blushing a bit, then slowly transforming to a total look of resignation. As a blind man, nothing was more important to him than the truth.

From my grandfather, I learned about patience, resignation, the value of truth…and how to whistle.

** He promised he wouldn't take me away from home until he was able to fully provide for me as my father did. It took a while, but when he did, he was true to his promise. A hard working man since the day I met him, it's hard for me to think of a more determined and motivated person. Sometimes I get tired just from watching him. At home he can't sit for longer than it takes us to watch a movie. Always has to be doing something, something productive, something fun – – yard work, washing the cars, fixing something, bike riding, or inventing outings — "Let's do something, c'mon…" — is commonly heard around our house during lazy Sunday afternoons.

Nearing 22 years, our marriage has experienced its common ups and downs, been challenged by financial and work related issues, and tested by some of life's toughest trials and tribulations, such as the illnesses and deaths of family members. Our first eight months of marriage were spent in my father's hospital room during his bout with cancer. I always thought, if our marriage survives this it can survive anything. Through it all, his encouragement, involvement, support and respect have consistently reigned over our household, fully committing to "for better or for worse…."

From my husband, I learned about determination, motivation, and commitment.

** They've loved me, no matter what. Despite my array of attitudes, and sometimes blatant irresponsible actions, they've loved me. This is unique love, this is crazy love. My mother, for instance, was full-blown menopausal when I was 18; trust me, the fact we didn't kill each other can only be attributable to one thing — unconditional love. A parent's unconditional love.

But being at the receiving end is one thing. It wasn't until I had my own children that I experienced the giving end of this kind of absolute and unwavering emotion. As a daughter I expected it, I took it for granted even. As a mother, I treasure every ounce of it. Because it is

what allows me to love my children the way I do. Yes, despite their array of attitudes, and sometimes blatant irresponsible actions, in a karma sort of way. Despite those days when you feel like sticking a price tag on them and putting them out on the lawn at the garage sale in the corner. Through tough love and hard lessons, this extravagant love makes me crave them. God gave us this wonderful crazy love. The same crazy love He has for us. A no-matter-what LOVE.

From my parents, my children, and God I learned about unconditional love.

** They have been my beacon through many of my lost and insecure journeys, showing me the light during some of my darkest moments. They’ve been my security blankets, reassuring me and comforting me. When my head’s been filled with arrogance lifting me up to the clouds, they’ve kept me in check, zapped me back to reality, and brought me back down to earth. They’ve put up with my sarcasm, stubbornness, obsessiveness, pride, and all the rest of me. And they’ve stuck. Like crazy glue.

From my friends, I learned about trust, compassion, acceptance, humility, forgiveness, and loyalty.

My experiences have made me who I am. All of me, the good and the bad that I am. I know there is much I have yet to learn. Admittedly, I have not always put into practice every wonderful lesson gained from the dear people I write about here. That’s resulted in the shoulda, coulda, wouldas of my life (a lesson in and of itself). But I am forever grateful to these people. Because I realize I have been profoundly influenced by them, and by those things I learned when I thought I wasn’t paying attention.

Life always gives us
exactly the teacher we need
at every moment.
This includes every mosquito,
every misfortune,
every red light, every traffic jam,

every obnoxious supervisor (or employee),
every illness, every loss,
every moment of joy or depression,
every addiction,
every piece of garbage,
every breath.
Every moment is the Guru.
~ Joko Beck

I am learning all the time. The tombstone will be my diploma.
~Eartha Kitt

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