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## Mrs. Miller

There are people in your life whose full impact can only be known many years later, with the benefit of hindsight and the perspective that is afforded by time and distance. Mrs. Miller was one of those people for me. I first met Mrs. Miller when I was ten years old. She was probably in her fifties, with two grown children in far away places.

With no children at home, Mrs. Miller found it a joy to take me under her wing. She showed me more of the world than what was in my home or my school. I acquired a taste for adventure by being her companion on long car rides through the Indiana countryside. Off we would go on a Sunday afternoon, in her gold colored Bonneville sedan--the kind with the bench seats that gave a small girl too much room to slide around in. A typical destination would be an open air flea market or an antique shop in a small Amish town. In our search for hidden treasures, Mrs. Miller gave me a glimpse of seeing the extraordinary in the ordinary. She noticed the little things and in her noticing, gave life to otherwise mundane objects—a wooden spoon with an unusual carving or a farm implement that spoke of long forgotten ways. A piece of fabric was not just threads woven together. It was a pattern and a texture that was part of a heritage or the work of an artist. She would see the sparkle, the unusual, the otherwise obscured part of a flea market find.

Even during my teen years, I enjoyed hanging around this elderly woman, her hands curled and gnarled like tree roots from arthritis. Her gray shock of hair was cut short and framed her face naturally, as if she was born with her hair looking that way. She called me Carol Ann and loved picking me up for an afternoon visit to her house. Her house was built backwards, with the front of the house facing the backyard, as to get the nicest view of the backyard from a large living room picture window. Her small kitchen window, by comparison, had a view of the street in front of her house

During those leisurely visits, she taught me to have patience in order to create with my hands. Mrs. Miller was Russian and she would tell me stories about her family's Russian traditions. We made Easter eggs with multiple layers of wax and dyes. At other times of the year, we made delicate cookies from family recipes and Waldorf salads. The process of creating was just as important as the resulting handicraft. She understood the rhythm of slowing down in order to create.

Mrs. Miller took nothing for granted and held life with the mindfulness of a Buddhist monk and the common sense of a housewife. She was purposeful in whatever she did. I still remember how lunch was a production. Not a frantic one but a calm process where the dishes we used mattered as much as the food itself. We picked a place in the house or on her patio to eat that was soothing. We used cloth napkins and fine silverware. To eat with Mrs. Miller was to taste and savor the flavors of the food.

Mrs. Miller knew the finer things in life, but had a frugality that said the finer things were just that—to be savored and not everyday occurrences. Growing up, she was the only person I knew with a pink couch, a beautiful pale shade of pink with cream stripes. She sewed her own clothes and wore blouses with Peter Pan collars and tweed skirts that fit perfectly. It was a treat to sit on the couch and eat cookies and talk about the world.

I don't remember specific topics we talked about. What I remember is that she was a keen observer of the world around her. She saw quirkiness and irony in situations that most people passed over. Her curiosity encouraged me to notice questions of my own. What she saw in the world widened my vision and what she thought about stretched my mind.

I learned the depth of what silence could bring to conversation from Mrs. Miller. I remember sitting in her living room and the luscious space when human beings are together and there is no need to talk, only to be. In this space, you can feel the sigh of a heart and the ruminations of an active mind and the poignancy of a passing comment. Her living room gave a frame for these quiet moments that were comfortable and natural.

Mrs. Miller was a housewife who made the most of her household world. She yearned to have a greater impact on the world. I learned from her the importance of having one's voice heard, especially when it didn't blend in to the chorus of society. She was no taller than 5 feet, yet she was unafraid to give her opinion, solicited or not. She was a fierce woman, not in physical stature but in her willingness to stand in her own passion.

She was feisty, a social activist with a deep heart. She instilled in me the spirit of change agents—an impatience for working in systems that no longer served its constituents, the exercising of common sense over decorum, and being unafraid to move into action. In her passion and sometimes anger at the way the world worked, she conveyed the pain she felt for others—whether it meant a family didn't get enough to eat or a man's self-esteem slipped after being unemployed for months. Her heart was open.

She volunteered at her church and it seemed to give her strength to be around prayer and the divine. We never directly discussed her faith or what it gave her. But I could tell that she was nourished by it.

Mrs. Miller was all the more remarkable because she was so different from my family. My family valued doing. She taught me the value of being. My family was a group of achievers. She taught me about creating. My family protected their hearts. She showed me what an open heart looked like. My family wanted conformity. She helped me to see the beauty of uniqueness.

After I went away to college at Northwestern, Mrs. Miller was my best pen pal. She wrote me faithfully, telling me about the weather in Fort Wayne, the cookies she baked last week, the visit with her grandchildren. I always recognized her letters, even before I pulled them out of the cubby in the mailroom of the dorm. She wrote on fine Crane paper, pale blue, with blue ink. Her handwriting was worse than mine, and there were times when I had to guess at words for the sentence to make sense. When I graduated from Northwestern, she was there for the ceremony. This older woman, who had mentored me as a teenager, saw me through to the end of my college days, proud of who I had become.

Over the years, I would visit Mrs. Miller, even though my parents no longer lived in Fort Wayne. The last time I saw her, I was driving cross country from Chicago to New Jersey with my husband. We were moving to New Jersey to take a job after graduate school. I would be working for the equivalent of Bell Labs. We stopped in Fort Wayne and saw Mrs. Miller with her school-age and toddler grandchildren. I still have that last picture of her in the backyard with her grandchildren.

When she died, I was living in Colorado. She died in December, just before Christmas. I didn't go to the funeral. Thinking back, the Christmas season seemed to be a convenient excuse not to travel. In reality, I was not ready to say goodbye.

I miss Mrs. Miller. It has been almost twenty years since I sat in her living room with the pink sofa. I still remember her devilish grin and the way she would ponder the meaning of world events. I will always think of her living in that backwards built house, enjoying a fine spring day, watching the squirrels in the backyard and asking the deeper questions of life.

What she showed me in how she lived her life is what I have experienced for myself many years later—to be present to the moment and to be true to oneself are part of being whole. I feel so lucky to have known her.

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