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Mom's Key to Longevity: Oatmeal and Prayers

By Camille Dolan
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(Photo by Monica Grabkowska at Unsplash)

My mother turns 88 this November. She is still working at a department store where she has been for more than 30 years. Her customers ask her two things: Why hasn't she retired yet and how does she keep going?

Her answer to the first: “It’s better to wear away than rust away.”

And to the second: “Oatmeal and prayers.” My mom has had that particular regimen every day for as long as I can remember. Her oatmeal – plain. Her prayers – many.

She was born in 1931 on a farm in Iowa. I have a photo of her when she was 7 or 8, her long blonde curls fluffed up behind her and she is surrounded by geese. It wasn’t until much later in my life I learned that geese are not typically cuddly animals. But they sure did love my mom.



My mom had three sisters and a brother. The only time I got a whiff of any sibling discord was when my mom longingly told me that her sister Edie had a Shirley Temple doll when she was younger.

She grew up with a farmer’s mentality of self-reliance. Her family grew their own food, made their own clothes, farmed their own land and helped others when they fell on hard times.

My mom still retains that Midwestern spirit. Aside from the practice of oatmeal and prayers, she mails cards of thanks to me after I’ve visited (I live 25 miles away). And instead of being a friend to geese, my mom now feeds the pigeons (she calls them her “flock”) twice a day.

I remember other things she told me about her childhood – like when she and her sisters had to use leg makeup instead of hosiery because silk production was going to the war efforts. She told me about having to paint the seam on the back of her legs (as the hosiery at that time had a seam in the back), and how her seams were always crooked.

I wish that I had known to write things down when we were younger. I figured my mom would always be there. Now, with her own memories growing dim, I have to rely on my childhood memories. I think about them when we sit on her couch and hold hands.

Like that one Halloween where it was too rainy to go trick-or-treating, but we huddled together on the porch under my dad's old Marine blanket, awaiting costumed kids who never came and eating all their candy. I can still remember us giggling together as we unwrapped yet another caramel.

Or that one Christmas when I got an Easy Bake oven. It came with mini-boxes of cake and cookie mix, and after those were gone, my mom helped me make small batches of cookies in the oven – a tablespoon of butter, two tablespoons of flour, etc.

She gives away what little she has. On a trip to St. Augustine, she let the rest of us walk ahead a little, while she dropped some money into a busker's basket. She then told him, "God bless you."

My mom was a conservationist before it was trendy.

She reuses aluminum foil, dilutes her dish-washing soap, and was wearing a pair of sneakers through which her big toe had poked, until I begged her to let me buy her another pair.

Until very recently, she did her own yard work and painted touch-ups on the outside of her house.

Dollarweeds bested her and she had to call a lawn service for eradication. The last time she painted, she fell off a stepladder and opened a gash in her head. When I picked her up at the hospital, she shrugged off the incident like it was no big deal.

Her head wound was not the worst thing that's happened in my mom's life. Her faith has helped her throughout her life in difficult times – but even when times are good, she runs her rosary through her fingers, her lips moving in silent prayers. She never misses Mass and, most Sundays, even drives a friend to services.

Now about that oatmeal. While it's true that my mom hardly strays from her regimen of oatmeal for breakfast and peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, she also has a sweet tooth that I help her indulge. I bring her a Dutch apple pie most Saturdays when I visit. She is always happy to see me, but sometimes she seems happier to see the pie.

This particular pie comes from a box; I bake it and put a crumb topping on it, and she raves about it as though it were homemade. She always makes me feel like the best cook in the world and her favorite child, and in those moments, perhaps I am.

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