Journey of a Wounded Healer

Brian Allan Skinner

5. Unpasteurized Milk and Honey

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My father had a stroke at age fifty that only slightly affected his motor abilities. Except for a slight slurring of his speech that persisted a while longer, he had recovered from the damage in less than a month. He never had another stroke and lived an additional thirty-one years, succumbing, finally, to cancer.

Far worse was the stroke that struck my maternal great-grandmother at age eighty-eight. Elodie was a robust and energetic woman who outlived two husbands. She maintained an immense garden and grew and canned all her food except corn, for which the far northern Wisconsin growing season was too short. She was fiercely independent and strong-willed, and enjoyed her life with a vitality that was an example to all of living a good life. I loved *Metchen* more than any of my other relatives at the time—or since. If children are spoiled by their grandparents, great-grandparents elevate that special treatment to the next level.

The entire family called her "Metchen" or "Grandma Metchen." The nickname was Flemish Belgian for "girl," meaning "serving girl" or "wench," and akin to the German "Mädchen," from the days when she ran a boarding house. Metchen was laid low by a stroke when I was twelve years old. I remember clearly when my family got the phone call. It changed my life and the way I looked at the world ever after. Her stroke was complete, meaning that she was paralyzed on both sides and could not speak. She was quadriplegic.

There was no doubt she recognized people, could hear and understand them, and had a sense of what was going on around her. But she was imprisoned in her body and could not communicate in any meaningful way with the world around her. I thought at the time that a crueler disability could not have been devised for this woman who had become my model of a person who loved life and lived it to the fullest according to her own lights.

My visits with Metchen over the next year always made me cry, but I did my best never to show my tears to her. At this time, the early 1960s, few hospitals or nursing homes were air-conditioned. About all I could do to ease her discomfort was to wet a washcloth in cool water and bathe her face with it. Often her hair was plastered to her forehead with sweat. Her expressions showed her gratitude and relief from the oppressive air.

To relieve her sense of entrapment, I told her everything that was happening in my life and at school. Her eyes remained alert and fixed on me the entire time, so I had no impression that my prattling bored her. I learned to embellish the truth to make it more interesting to this poor woman whose body was her jail.

Metchen lived but a few days short of a year after her stroke without the slightest improvement. I believed her suffering absolved her of any punishment her lusty and unapologetic way of living might have merited her in the hereafter. She had paid the debt in full—with interest.

Two of my fondest memories of Metchen include the time, when I was about eight-years-old, that she sent me to buy corn from a farm market by the bridge over the Nemadji River. On the way back to her house I crossed an enormous mown field that was more yellow with dandelions than it was green with grass. I picked dandelions for her by the fist-full, realizing too late that I had set the paper sack of corn somewhere along the way and could not find it. I backtracked and meandered back and forth across the field, but never found the corn. It was growing dark and there was not enough change jangling in my jeans pocket to buy more.

I presented Metchen with the finest array of dandelions I had ever collected and pulled the change from my pocket, but had to explain, quite sheepishly, that I had lost the six ears of corn. Metchen said not a word. She placed the dandelions in a water-filled blue-and-white vase that showed them off quite handsomely. She opened a jar of her pickled corn from the previous year for she, and I, and my great-grandfather Arthur. She set the vase of dandelions in the center of the table for all to see.

The second memory or, rather, memories, were repeated often over the years. It involved Metchen sending me out to her garden to pick raspberries for my cereal. She made an exception to not purchasing store-bought food in getting me a box of Rice Krispies for my visits. She filled a china bowl with the cereal and sent me into the garden to gather as many berries as I thought I could eat. There were never too many. I and the raspberry bushes grew at approximately the same rate, so the reddest and juiciest ones at the top always remained just at the edge of my being able to reach them. I considered the small prickly thorns to be the charge for gathering one of favorite fruits. I recall many mornings when the dew glistened on the fine fur of the berries and soaked my gym shoes on the wet grass between rows. Back in the kitchen with my bowl of cereal and raspberries, Metchen dripped honey over them and drowned them in the unpasteurized milk she preferred.

Decades later the smell of raspberries, even from their plastic containers at the supermarket, evokes these memories and transports me back to my great-grandmother's garden on a dewy morning. On a china plate beside my bowl of cereal, she placed a thick slice of her homemade raisin bread. Every morning there were baking pans of rising bread dough covered in linen towels at the sides of the stairs coming down from the upstairs bedroom. Onto my still-warm slice of raisin bread she smeared some of her special butter from the butter dish. I learned much later that her homemade butter was actually oleomargarine. What I thought was her churning the butter was her adding the packet of yellow food dye to the clear, gelatinous oleo, a practice mandated by the Wisconsin law that forbade look-alike non-dairy products. Metchen had never disabused me of the notion that she made her own butter, too.

I realize now how these unexceptional memories of quite simple and ordinary incidents have enriched my life. Their immediacy is still with me and I can call them up whenever I wish. Their tastes and flavors and images are always at hand. They are the legacy of this beautiful woman who played a major role in making me who I am. I have drawn from her wellspring of fortitude and patience in bearing up under my own stroke.