

Cherie Dupuis
(573)418-8668
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Being Enough

My mother was cleaning out the barn yet again. It had become a space for family to store unused furniture and other items. Mom was on a mission to show the world and herself that she was a good person who could stay on top of messy situations. She knew the world loved driven women who go-go-go. But she longed to be done and finally have time for herself.

So here she was on a hot summer day, knocking down cobwebs and mud dauber nests, and rearranging heavy boxes. She was dirty and sweaty and irritable. A car pulled up next to the barn and honked. Mom, the queen of quick retorts, said a few choice words at yet another interruption in her effort to get to her real life. But she went out and was polite.

An elderly man limped toward her. "Marine! Don't you know who I am?" Mom stared and bit her tongue again. She did not want to play games.

"Marine, it's me, Don." She leaned forward and through the paunch and bald head and stooped manner, she could just barely recognize him. They had been engaged to marry 60 years before. She had met my father and left Don in a dramatic turn of events. Now, as she looked at him, she felt nothing. He was the road not taken.

Over coffee he told her that he now lived in Arizona with his second wife. He had made this trip to Missouri to specifically see Mom because he was dying and he needed to know something before he was gone. Did she make the right decision all those years ago? Was she happy?

Mom was not the introspective type. She didn't ask herself if she was happy or could be doing better. She just kept moving and straightening things trying to get to a better place. But this question stopped that forward momentum. Was she happy? Did she make the right decision? Here was Don, wealthy but childless. A man who cared deeply for her and would have gone the extra mile to spare her some of the hardships she had experienced in the marriage she chose. But she also remembered being smothered by the protectiveness he offered.

She described her reaction to me later. "Cherie, I realized I AM happy. I chose the right life partner. Your dad did not protect me as Don wanted to do. Not only did he not protect me, but he frequently expected me to carry both of us. But he did not interfere with decisions I made or suggest that he could have done better. And I realize I like the strength that built in me. My life has been a gift."

That realization loosened something in her. She saw herself as someone who made good decisions. She started doing more of what she enjoyed rather than what others expected of her. She had nothing more to prove. She was enough. So she stitched and traveled, gardened and partied through the rest of her life. Mom would have agreed with Florida Scott-Maxwell, "When you truly possess all you have been and done, you are fierce with reality."

When Mom died, we children cleaned out that barn because she never got back to it. And we were fine with that.

Cherie Dupuis is a member of the Jottings Group at the Lake Oswego Adult Community Center.