



Darby Patterson

Moms and the lessons they are learning

It's Mother's Day, meaning my day, for I am one — mother of three eclectic, dissimilar, beautiful individuals.

I will readily admit I have not been the best mother — not knowing the recipe for mothering and having arrived at my personal style through trial and frequent error.

Nonetheless, in each little moment big and small, I have done my best as have most mothers on the planet.

I wonder — and part of me is certain of this — if my children will end up wishing they had a cake-baking, apron-wearing mom with soft shoulders and laughing eyes. I worry about my boy being brought up by an aggressive, professional-type woman who doesn't like to toss a football or spend the day at Waterworld.

I temper those concerns by reminding myself of the hours I spend with his schooling, the comic books I've read to him before bedtime when I was ready to drop, how I let him grow his hair so long he could chew on it, the times I've let him steer the car in the parking lot of the supermarket, how I got over a distaste for rats when he wanted one and how I taught him to rollerskate so that he can now spin circles around me.

These, and other little things, I hope he'll one day remember when he's weighing my sins. Perhaps, after all, it's the lessons we don't intend to teach that are learned the best.

In my own cramped little Midwest home, I remember my purely Polish grandmother making sandwiches for the hoboes who rode the rails just across the street. Her benevolence was etched into telephone poles that lined the tracks and the bindlestiffs came to our back porch with regularity.

She used separate plates for her down-and-out visitors — to protect her family from "God knows what" — but stood by the sink and made hearty roast beef sandwiches while telling me, "Even if all you have is one strawberry, you still have enough to share."

I have found this to be true and have become adept at slicing things very thin.

Her tiny home was a sanctuary she seldom left — a symbol she'd traveled far from the dirt-floor cabin of her immigrant parents where they'd grown the vegetables that graced the family's table. Poverty had left its scars and, consequently, my grandmother became committed to things in cans — beans, corn, peas, Spam, soups. Anything but fresh, which was a reminder of a bleak childhood.

In my family, the only member to get food from a can is our dog, Tootsie.

At the dinner table, my grandmother would preach about waste until guilt drove me to secretly slide bread crusts onto my lap, wrap them in tissue and flush them down the toilet — a "sin" which each Saturday I confessed to the priest. Later, I was very shocked to discover that my grandmother was not the only person concerned about "the poor starving children in China."

I never make my son eat his crusts.

Later at night, when we came together for the evening news on TV, she would comment on the shameful things happening in the world. In the 60s she was appalled at race riots — although Poles were the only minority in our neck of the Minnesota woods.

"That's terrible, just terrible," she'd say, clicking her tongue. "Their hearts are just as white as ours."

This comment never struck me as contradictory and racist, as it may seem by today's standards. She laid the framework for my own passion over racial inequities with her well-intentioned disgust.

These are things I recall when I gather together distant images that paint my picture of mothering. I have others, not nearly so pleasant but far less important. When, and if, we finally grow up, there is no one to blame for the quality of our lives.

We do, however, have people to thank for big lessons learned in small moments. As a mom, I probably won't even know when they are happening.

Only later, much later my boy might say, "I remember when my mom made corn muffins as hard as asteroids. But she tried. She really tried."

Darby Patterson is The Union's regional editor.