

International Women's Day - Mary Jo

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I remember when I was young, my mother asked me what I wanted to do with my life. What were my dreams and aspirations? She was very serious. I said: "I want to write songs that everybody will hear. I will sing and play guitar in a band we'll travel the world and perform."

She smiled and said "Is that all?"

I knew this game. I was prepared for it. Parents were always the voice of reason. They were known to disassemble dreams and put them in a stifling box called 'reality.' It was the tough love children needed to survive in the real world. So I was heaping it on. I figured the more outlandish my dreams were, the better. I was making it easy for her to dismantle them.

"My songs will be so popular, that my band will sell out Madison Square Garden. Not just one, but several nights!"

There was the cherry. Now would come the sensible talking to. I braced for it.

"Is that all?" She said. "Well, when you play your sold out shows at Madison Square Garden, I would like a ticket."

Mary Jo Wilford was raised in a strict Catholic household. Shy and unassuming, she married young and began a family as a stay at home mom. After many years, 3 girls and a boy, she decided that was enough - and then began an evaluation of her life. At 30, she realized that all her life to that point had been like following a meticulous project plan. Societal norms pointed the way, and she fell in line.

Then something wonderful happened. She began to question everything. She was no longer satisfied with staying home. What else could she do? Certainly, there was something she was good at besides raising children and keeping the household in order. She had no college education, so where to start?

But start she did - landing an entry level position with the newly elected senator of Iowa, Dick Clark. Over the course of a few short years, she soon discovered she was capable of many things. In constituent services, she was able to assist Iowans with all sorts of issues. She began to realize that she was not just good at it - she was great. And that helping others was rewarding work.

Back home, the questions continued. She began to question her faith and the arcane doctrine of the mighty Catholic church itself. They could not answer Mary's questions to her satisfaction, so she persisted in asking more. Subsequently, Mary was asked to leave.

She became an activist for women's rights, for civil rights. She marched and protested, volunteering and fighting for African-Americans, and Native Americans, and all minorities, raising her voice and leveraging her new found abilities and skills to help people whenever and wherever she could.

These events validated her instincts. She had towed the line all these years, because she thought that was how life was, how it was supposed to be. But what if she wanted something different? She had found her life's mission. It had taken her well into her thirties to blossom into the person she really was.

That person was not the same shy, unassuming girl who married my father, and though society looked down on it, divorce was a difficult but necessary transition.

From that point on, there was no stopping Mary. When Senator Dick, Clark lost his reelection bid in 1979 she applied for a job with New Jersey, Senator Bill Bradley, and was hired as Director of Constituent Services where she would serve for the next 18 years. Landing this position required her to relocate to the East Coast, leaving her friends and family behind. But she packed up her few belongings into a Plymouth Duster, and off she went.

She settled into the cozy town of Cranford, New Jersey- and would never live anywhere else the rest of her days. There is a plaque with her name on it in the garden courtyard of English Village.

Without this series of events, the course of my life would have been dramatically different. I had no interest in the busy cities, boroughs and towns on the East Coast. But because of her relocation, I too became very familiar with Cranford, Newark, Elizabeth, Union, Sandy Hook, Lavallette, and of course the greatest city in the world: New York City.

I think of my mom as a great pioneer of our family. I am forever grateful for her.

When I tell this story, some people think it incredulous that my mother chose to leave her children behind with their father, pull up stakes and venture a thousand miles away across the country. (There were only two of us kids left in the household at that time, but I was only eleven.) Before my mom left for the East Coast, she sat down with me and explained

everything, all of this, and made sure that it was all OK with me.

And I was not sad. I could see the new person that she was. I could see the excitement in her face, lit up and alive, young again, finally being able to live a life that she had never known she was capable of before. I was happy for her. I loved her. I adored her. And we celebrated the moment, because we both knew that though I would not be with her every day, or may not see her for several weeks, even months at a time, there would most certainly be adventures to come. And that was true. Because we had many, many, adventures together in the years that followed.

My mom died of cancer in 2012 at just 73 years old. I miss her beyond what words I can possibly express, but most days I do not dwell on what could have been, but instead celebrate the memories we shared. The stories endure. They are magnificent tales. And I am happy to share them. They all start with a boy from an Iowa farm who goes with his mother to Times Square.

It is no understatement that my mother shaped who I am today. She shaped my political and world views. She nurtured in me this deep well of empathy that is both a blessing and a curse.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

I have always looked to the wonderful, strong women in my life for their enduring love, wisdom and support: My wife, Kristen, my sisters Liz, Laura and Kathy, my grandmothers, Aggie and Dorothy, my step-mother, Donna, my mother in law, Janet. I am grateful beyond measure to have each of them in my life.

Happy International Women's Day. I champion, appreciate and celebrate you all.