

## The Female of the Species

I, like you, owe my life to a woman. That is a matter that deserves reflection, not because of the science but because of the fact that procreation for all of its drive and passion has, in itself, relegated women to a back seat in much of history. Words like “confinement” and now “maternity leave” have often defined women as being less available, less engaged in issues outside their personal biology, and less strong than men. My experience does not support this definition of women. In fact, I have come to believe that Mr. Kipling was right when he wrote:

“When the Himalayan peasant meets the he-bear  
in his pride;

He will shout to scare the monster, who will often  
turn aside.

But the she-bear thus accosted, rends the  
peasant tooth and nail;

For the female of the species is more deadly than  
the male.”

My father, who was a poet himself and something of a philosopher instructed me to recite those lines every morning before I did anything else. The evidence I have gathered over the past sixty-eight years supports his advice.

Let me begin by dispelling the myth about math. With the exception of that one girl who was destined to be Valedictorian – that Phenom who, if I got an A on a test, always got an A Plus,

and a commendation for good penmanship while she was at it. Except for her, it was an assumption in the schools I attended in Kentucky that the average of the girls in math would always fall below the average of the boys. This assumption was refuted for me by the fact that another assumption was that every girl could sew. Sewing is an exercise in three-dimensional descriptive geometry – translating a set of drawings into a three-dimensional result. I have studied those drawings. My mom was often so distracted by other opportunities that she would fail to shop for the quotidian items like toilet paper. Her usual substitute was old dress patterns – explaining to us that “It’s all just tissue paper. Use it and don’t complain.” Having completed my degree in engineering I conclude that nothing I took in my engineering drawing classes matches the complexity of translating those two-dimensional drawings – with all of their detailed instructions - into three dimensional realities. Yet Grandma, Mom and even my sisters did just that on a regular basis, often adjusting the final dimensions by a half size to fit the wearer – without ever asking a man to do any math for them. It makes a person wonder whether my high school math teachers grew up in nudist colonies, where there was no need for sewing.

Another assumption was that women were just not as entrepreneurial as men; that women were fully occupied by the fulfilling tasks of raising children and keeping house, so they had no interest in looking outside for work. My data points here start with my Grandma; born in 1900 into a world where this assumption was fully embraced. Yes, she did raise four

children, yes she did keep house, but she did so much more. She provided lunches every day for all of the workers – me included - in Grandpa’s little construction company. For seventy-five cents apiece we had a meal that couldn’t be matched at any restaurant in town. (In fact, if I ever have to face that “last meal,” I am going to ask the warden to provide Grandma’s chicken-fried steak, fried apples and hot strawberry cobbler.) But maybe cooking lunch every day for eight or ten men, or making wedding dresses for all the girls in the neighborhood, might be relegated to housekeeping. After all she was just earning her “pin money” as women’s earnings were often described back then. So I add the fact that Grandma made candy. Not fudge for the kids, but candy that would compete with anything that Esther Price ever produced.

Months before Christmas and Easter (making chocolate candy in the era before air conditioning was a cool weather job.) we would make the trek to Cincinnati to the bakers’ supply for a car load of five-pound chocolate slabs and other assorted sweet materials. Then we would stop by Saalfeld Paper for white one-pound and two-pound boxes, and candy papers. I can attest to the science involved (mostly thermodynamics) because I learned a lot about the making of candy as I moved the marble slabs from out in the cold to the warm kitchen, where they were used to cool and mold the fondant and chocolate. My reward for shaving the chocolate blocks so they could go into the double boilers was that I could sneak the last quarter pound into my jeans pocket for later consumption.

Grandma made far more than pin money from this endeavor, although because it wasn't a real business she was expected to give away as many boxes as she sold. I attribute most of my success in school – or at least my teachers' forbearance – to the fact that I took each teacher a two-pound box of Grandma's candy at Christmas and a giant, decorated opera cream egg at Easter. That made up for a host of academic and behavioral sins.

Then of course there was the weaker sex assumption; that women just weren't physically capable of keeping up with men. Not sure where this came from because it was never evidenced where I grew up. A good data point was blackberry picking. We were blessed to have great blackberry thickets that yielded fruit in the tens of gallons; however, they were not cultivated so you would have to literally tunnel through the thorns back into the thicket to reach the best berries. This was in mid-July in 90 degree heat, and the chiggers, gnats, bees and mosquitos came along for the fun. The berry season was short so both sexes, young and old, were called to work. More than once I saw my mom lead a man down the hill to the well-house to set in the shade and recover; and in the case of Uncle Leroy, she literally dragged him down the hill after he had passed out from the heat. On the other hand, I don't remember her needing any help with her part of the work.

Finally, there was the myth of squeamishness; that women just aren't as tough as men. You would only need to know my little sister, Betty Lynn, the horse woman. I don't know how many rods, plates and screws you need to have installed in your lower

extremities before you qualify as macho; but I do know that Betty Lynn would set off the scanner at the airport if she walked through nude. There was the time that she decided to do a little cross-country training while her husband - an ironworker - was off at work. Luckily his crew finished up early that day and he was able to find her laying in a field after her horse stumbled coming down from jumping a farm fence. If I ever had a compound fracture of my leg, I would never get on a horse again, but all she wanted to talk about was when she would be ready to compete. That goes beyond just not being squeamish; that is just plain tough.

My favorite Betty Lynn story happened after she and her husband moved to their current farm. The place hadn't been occupied for several years, but her first priority wasn't a new or remodeled house; her priority was a barn for the horses. We went out one hot summer day to start working on the barn. Did I mention that in addition to being an expert horse trainer, Betty Lynn is a journeyman carpenter? At any rate, there came a time on that first day when Betty Lynn needed to use the facilities. She sat down to do her business in the ancient outhouse, only to find that a large family of wasps had taken up residence just under the toilet seat. The picture of that big woman, coming out of the outhouse screaming, beating her own butt, and at the same time trying to get her carpenter overalls back up, is better than anything I have seen on "America's Funniest Home Videos." Of course, she was back at work long before we stopped laughing. Tough indeed.

Many years later a woman put my own toughness into context. I grew up believing that we builders were doing something heroic – turning dreams into reality at an epic scale. When you are doing something heroic, being injured is just like being wounded in battle. We wore our scars as symbols of our heroic efforts. We talked of stiches as “patching leaks” and arm casts as “body hammers.” One of Grandpa’s firm rules was, “Never bleed on the finish work.” When Grandpa sawed a half-inch off his left, middle finger, first he bound it up tight so he wouldn’t drip on the work, then he nailed the severed end to a post in the shop, as a reminder to the rest of us of how tough we should be. So, I was convinced that I was tough. Then I developed a kidney stone; and I concluded that I was suffering as no human had suffered since Job walked the earth. I was in the hospital trying to pass the stone when one of my wife’s friends, who had been a combat nurse in Vietnam, came by to visit. I was in such pain that my part of the conversation was reduced to grunts, but she wasn’t expecting much in the way of answers. She just stopped by my room and said, “I heard you were here, with a kidney stone. Hurts doesn’t it? It is as close as any man will get to experiencing the pain of childbirth. If you men were in charge, the species would die out.” Then she grinned and left; leaving me to reconsider my own toughness in the light of my wife’s three natural childbirths.

In spite of all this data, I accepted the party line and assumed that I was in a superior position as a man, created by God to be smarter, stronger and more energetic than women. This belief was strengthened by the fact that I went to work with Grandpa

starting at the age of six, and spent most of my time, growing up, with a group of construction workers who reinforced each other's belief that they were smarter, stronger, etc.

The formal education of Pete Strange started one evening when I was sixteen years old. We young people were having a pancake dinner at church to raise money for some project. In that distant age if you ordered a lot of pancake mix from Aunt Jemima, the company representative herself – a large, black woman, complete with apron and red bandana – would show up to kick off the cooking. Having an outsider cook on the big, black, gas stove in the church basement broke the monopoly of control that the church women had on that appliance. So, when Aunt Jemima stepped away to personally serve some pancakes, my friend Tommy and I jumped into the space to show what smart, strong, energetic guys we were. To maximize the impact of our accomplishment we decided to fill the entire skillet with pancake batter, figuring that one really big pancake was better than two or three smaller ones. We were better at action than we were at planning, as we found out when we attempted to flip our pancake and ended up with half of it in the skillet and half of it on the gas burner. Lesson one in my learning came when a tall, skinny girl walked over, looked at us with pity and contempt and said, “Get out of my way and I will cook the pancakes.” That was just the first of a thousand times that my wife has looked at me with pity and contempt and started a sentence with, “Get out of my way and I will . . .” Over the years it has become clear that I am not smarter, stronger or more energetic than her.

And, my wife brought Dad's advice into focus for me. We had been married about a year when her Grandpa, a coal miner, died. We went out to southern Illinois for the funeral and after the service we repaired to the family farmhouse for the wake. I was standing on the front porch between the two porch swings, fellowshipping with my new relatives, when a storm came up and passed by so fast that it almost knocked me off my feet. From the corner of my eye I caught sight of my kind and gentle wife as she dragged a woman out of the house, down the porch steps and tried to coldcock her with a roundhouse left to the jaw. My wife's uncle caught her arm just in time to stop the carnage. I rushed to her side to see what argument had led up to this fight; and all she would say was, "I heard her say something bad about my Grandpa." No attempt at rebuttal; no warning; just a grab by the collar and a roundhouse left. This hair-trigger response has occurred other times during our marriage. I took it to heart when I overheard my wife tell a friend who was getting a divorce, "Oh, I have given this matter a lot of thought and I don't think we can afford a divorce. We can afford as nice a wake as Pete would like, but not a divorce."

Because of my profession, and my personality, I have been witness to a lot of fights among men. Men are generally like an old, floor-shift, four-speed truck. You can hear a man shift gears (sometimes very nosily) two or three times before he gets up enough speed to throw a punch. With a man you usually have time to step in and calm things down, or at least gather some friends to watch the entertainment.

My experience with women – especially with my wife – is that there are only two gears, soft and gentle and all-out hell. If you take time to talk, you risk being hit with that roundhouse left.

But of course, learning to respect your betters as well as your elders was one thing inside the family and another thing, completely, out in the world. Again, my attitude was reinforced by the fact that I entered a male-dominated field by going to engineering school. When I was away from home, I was in classes made up of men (one woman in my entire freshman class) and taught by men. I suffered a relapse; coming to believe that the only extraordinary women were in my family.

Lesson two in my education came when, as part of my co-op job with Messer Construction, I was assigned to a project for Procter & Gamble at Miami Valley Laboratories. I was a popular addition to the project because I had a pick-up truck and was willing to haul some logs we cut during site clearing down to the local sawmill. The result was enough money to buy coffee and donuts for the crew for a couple of months, assuring that the men's club was happy with me. Then one day I looked out of the project trailer window to see a young woman unfold out of a little, yellow, MG Midget and walk toward the trailer, in a dress and high heels. I knew that she was not just lost; she was from another planet. I, like most of the men on the job, considered it something of a joke that P&G had required Messer to hire a woman to do the project accounting. Diversity might be fine for P&G but it was not possible that a woman would be smart enough, strong enough, or energetic enough to last in construction.

In the full grip of my cultural misconceptions, I was emboldened to explain the situation to the new hire. A couple of days after she started I explained to her that there are two groups of people in construction. There are builders, men like me who are smart, strong and energetic, and who make money. Then there is the second group that counts the money that we builders make; we call them bean counters. It might be okay for a woman accountant to be a bean counter, but she could never aspire to be a true builder.

I got to share this story forty years later when Kathy Daly – that P&G hire – retired as chief financial officer of Messer. The punchline came fifteen years after we first met, when I had talked my way into a Sunday morning meeting with a “Big Six” accounting firm partner, to discuss whether we employees could buy the company we were working for. He may have had some good ideas; but he was talking about discount rates, cash flow projections, pricing theory and a host of other concepts that might have applied to making widgets, but didn’t seem to apply to the fragmented, volatile, transactional construction industry. My primary takeaway from the meeting was that there was a hell of a lot that they didn’t teach me in engineering school. The partner left to go tailgate at the Bengals game, and I, very depressed, went downstairs in the high-rise to find a pay phone.

I called Kathy at home and the conversation went something like this:

“Kathy; this is Pete.”

“What do you want?”

“Kathy, do you remember that conversation we had the first week you were with Messer?”

“Pete; I cannot believe you are drunk already on a Sunday morning.”

“Kathy; don’t hang up. You need to know that I am on a pay phone downtown and the cord is just long enough for me to get down on my knees and tell you that I need the help of an accountant really badly right now.”

We spent fifty-two of the next fifty-six weekends together and finally came up with a model that allowed employees, with no capital, to buy a company. I had met a woman from outside the family who was as smart, strong and energetic as any man.

Of course, while I was blissfully unaware, Kathy’s strength was shown by the fact that she was still with the firm after fifteen years. It was not a warm and welcoming environment. After the P&G project was completed, she was invited to come to the office because it was obvious that Messer would benefit from the accounting discipline that she brought to our work. When she arrived she found an office environment where men were allowed to smoke at their desks, while women were required to go to the ladies’ room.

An environment where each day about 11:30am the receptionist was instructed to say over the intercom, “The men are going to lunch.” Not the officers, not the managers, but the men; making it clear that “men” described the first two groups. It all came to a head when a young project accountant, whom Kathy had hired, gloated to her that he had been invited to the company holiday party - which was men only so it could be a springboard for carousing for an entire weekend. I was at a distance, so I don’t know exactly what Kathy said to the bosses, but she showed up for that Christmas party. My memory is that she would not join the after party poker games because she said that it made no economic sense – but she was there until the games ended.

Until that breakthrough the one strong woman at Messer had to lead through subversion. Miss Shrenk (I would never ever call her Helen) was a five foot tall dragon and a fixture at the company when I arrived. She had been there since the company founding and she was in charge of keeping the books. I met Miss Shrenk, on my first day working in Estimating at the Messer office. The head of Estimating instructed me to wrap some drawings and mail them to an out-of-town subcontractor. When it came time to take the package to the post office, I asked about funds, explaining that I had zero cash in my possession. He had a sense of humor, so he suggested that I go to accounting and ask Miss Shrenk for an advance to cover the charges – then he snuck along behind me to watch the fun. I walked into accounting and asked what I took to be a nice, little, old lady if she would advance me ten dollars for postage.

Miss Shrenk jumped up from her chair and, in the iciest tone imaginable said, “Young man; I don’t know who you are, but you had to go through two doors marked “private” to get to where you are standing. What in the world gave you the idea that a bank that lends money resides behind those doors? If you are in fact an employee of this company, and if you do, in fact, have a reason to incur expenses on behalf of the company, then you may seek reimbursement; and if I deem the expenditure to be appropriate, you will be reimbursed. Now get out!” It was obvious to me that in spite of her size Miss Shrenk fought in the heavyweight division. I borrowed some money from another estimator, mailed the drawings, then I asked the laughing department head for reimbursement.

Yelling at new employees notwithstanding, it took me many years to understand Miss Shrenk’s power. After we became friends she shared her method for controlling Charles Messer. Charles liked to use the construction company cash flow to develop real estate. When he was ready to start a real estate project, he would sit down with Miss Shrenk to review the accounts. She would show him a bank ledger with an account balance that would just cover the next two months of payroll and suggest that he delay his pet project until additional cash was available. Then, after she had Charles slowed down, she would bring out the other bank ledger where she tracked the actual bank balance. The organization chart does not always show who is in charge. Miss Shrenk may not have been allowed to smoke at her desk, but she regularly set fire to Charles Messer’s plans, if they went beyond her allowable limits.

The breakthrough of attending the company party, led to Kathy being invited to drinks and conversation for actual business reasons; rather than as an object of misplaced desire. At one of those after work meetings I got a practical exposure to Kathy's allowable limits.

The limits on hitting on Kathy were already well established. Back in that first week on the P&G job one of the "old gnarly guys" had taken an interest in her and, as often as he could, stopped by her desk to chat. What the rest of us couldn't see was that Fred liked to chat with his hand on Kathy's shoulder. After a couple of days of success with that, Fred's weak brain cells convinced him that he might go further, and he moved the hand. All we heard was, "Fred, if you ever touch me again, I will knock the shit out of you!" Nobody messed with Kathy after that first, failed experiment.

The after work business conversation I recall involved Kathy, me and Joe, the vice president of operations. Joe was a great mentor, but he had some very conservative ideas about the roles of women. His own wife stayed at home, raised eight kids and never learned to drive – "because she belonged at home, not gallivanting all over the county." The topic of the conversation that evening was my brand new company car, provided to me because I had to visit a number of projects each week. Kathy, as head of project accounting, also visited projects but had not been offered a car; a matter that galled her considerably. Joe thought he was making great sense as he explained that Kathy, as a woman, could not expect the same perks as a man. After all, she didn't have a wife and family to take care of.

When he got to the part about her needing to find a good and successful husband, who could buy her a new car if she wanted one, Kathy stopped talking and just stared at him – and I got worried. Joe went on, right up to the moment when Kathy reached over and took a full pitcher of beer off the bar and poured it over the vice president’s head. Joe proved he was a good friend and mentor by not reacting at work; and I got a new data point regarding Kathy’s boundaries.

Of course Kathy quickly fell into the category of the exception that proves the rule. She was the only woman in the meetings. (Kathy used to say that she knew she would be the only woman in the meeting; she just hoped she wasn’t the only person in the meeting without World War II stories to share.) Because she was the only woman in the meetings, we thought of her as the only woman aggressive enough and ambitious enough to succeed in construction. Then Kathy started about the business of breaking new ground by inviting other smart, strong, energetic women to join the firm. One of them became my assistant when I became president after the buyout.

Kathy met Sandy because Kathy lived on the West side of Cincinnati and Sandy worked as a hairdresser in the salon that Kathy frequented. They talked and Sandy shared her ambition to be something more in life than a hair stylist. Kathy recognized talent and hired Sandy as a timekeeper on one of Messer’s projects. A timekeeper filled out the timesheets for the job payroll, entered approved invoices into a ledger, and helped to put together the monthly billing.

Not a very compelling job; so Sandy asked for more and ended up as an accounting clerk in the main office.

I have to admit that I am no joy to work for. When my oldest son was sixteen I sat him down and asked him if he might like to join me in construction. My son looked at me very seriously and said, “Dad; not only do I not want to work in construction; I pray to God that I never have a job where I have to talk to you on the telephone. You are a tad too intense for the rest of the world.” He was probably right because, after living with me through the negotiations to buy the company, the wonderful, older lady who was then my assistant announced that she would rather retire – or have continuous dental work – than to remain in her position. It just so happened that at that same time Sandy was once again asking for more. Sandy got more than she bargained for but she did a splendid job; and she never stopped asking for more. She moved from assistant to colleague, and now Sandy is Vice President of Risk Management for the company; and a data point about women and ambition.

Today I believe there are over 100 women in management, at Messer including several officers. The journey; however, has not been smooth. One woman, who is now a senior project leader, had to learn the hard way that people who weigh one hundred pounds cannot absorb alcohol at the same rate as people who weigh two hundred pounds. As a young project engineer she decided to keep up with the boys and then to show them a thing or two as she exited the party in her jeep. Luckily neither she nor anyone else was injured; the jeep was not so lucky and did not survive.

Early in her career that young project manager was assigned to build a project for WalMart. Her first conversation with the owner's representative – an unreconstructed hillbilly in Bentonville, Arkansas - included his sharing that he could deal with a girl as long as everything was going all right, but if there were problems, he would need to talk with the Boss Man. She handled the project – and him – just fine.

I was reluctant to confront that owner, proving that it is one thing to experience discrimination, but a whole different level of sensitivity to confront discrimination when it is not happening to you. There was a memorable lesson when I invited Kathy to a client celebration at a local country club and she asked me to make sure women were welcome. I couldn't imagine that would be a problem; and she found herself at a cocktail party in the Men's Grill, where she was briskly informed that women could not be served under the bylaws of the club. Proving that I am a slow learner, the next day, when she came in fuming, I responded with, "You've been around construction and business long enough to know that these things happen. Just get over it." For the next couple of weeks I tried to figure out whether it would be enough for me to just burn down the country club, or whether I would need to plow the ashes under with salt.

My interactions with Kathy and my wife led to a rhetorical question that some of my associates posed on a regular basis. The question was, "If Pete is alone in the woods and neither his wife nor Kathy are there to hear him, and he speaks; is he still wrong?"

At that point I was beginning to understand that some of my assumptions might not be well founded. To quote Mr. Twain: “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

The journey and my personal education were far from completed. I came to think of the company the way I thought of my family. Inside I might meet smart, strong women, but outside was a different world – and I was very slow in recognizing my role in changing that world.

I was helped along in my journey by being introduced to the Catholic faith. Where I grew up I had no real exposure to Catholics. I spent all of my time with family, which included a converted Catholic who became a Baptist minister – so I did not get much in the way of positive information. When I came to Cincinnati to work and asked people where they were from, I would get answers like, “St. Al’s, St. Gert’s, St. Liz’s and St. Dom’s. I thought those were the oddest named towns, but soon came to learn that in Cincinnati, especially in the construction industry, you cannot avoid learning about the Catholic faith. So, I learned Catholicism through experience.

I learned to walk the steps on Good Friday. For us construction workers that meant knocking off early and walking the steps up into the bar at Meiner’s Café, across the street from St. Clement Church in St. Bernard. With the doors on the cafe and the church open, we could hear the service just fine sitting at the bar.

Then I met the nuns. One day a nun named Sister Jean Patrice Harrington called me and said, “Young man, I need an hour of your time.” Thirty non-profit boards later I now understand that when a nun says that to you, she means an hour a day forever.

From Sister John Marion I learned that if a seventy year old nun calls you and says, “Pete; I’ve been thinking of you.” You should grab your wallet, not your heart.

And when Sister Francis Marie asked me to chair the board at the College of Mount St. Joseph, I learned the answer to “the question.” I told her that I was honored to be considered for the job, but what shall I say when people ask, “Are you Catholic?” She smiled and said, “There is just one answer to that question. Just say not yet.”

Most important, from these smart, strong, energetic women I learned to be thankful for my blessings. One of the blessings of my life is that these women found their calling in the church; so I didn’t have to compete with them in business!

The nuns helped me find evidence that I am not the only one on this learning journey; and that the world is indeed changing. Sister Jean introduced me to what is now Easter Seals, where I served as board chair in support of a brilliant woman CEO. At the Mount, Sister Francis was one of the smartest, most accomplished leaders I have ever encountered. Then I chaired the Chamber Board, another brilliant woman CEO; and the Greater Cincinnati Foundation Board, another brilliant woman CEO, and on and on goes my learning.

Which brings me to the matter of writing. I believe that the written word is the best tool that human kind has yet devised for sharing information across time and distance, and for growing ideas from mere seeds to full grown timbers in the structure of our society. My learning about women included learning about writing. Early in my career at Messer one of the senior officers introduced me to his sister, Ruth. I could only meet Ruth in writing because Ruth taught at the Indian School in Ephrata, Washington. She had gone there right out of high school during the Great Depression, because there was no work for a girl in Cincinnati and she didn't want to be a burden on her parents. What a teacher Ruth was. She sent me books and challenged me to dig deeper than the plot. She got mad when I described one of her books as a girl's book. She would regularly send me national competition crossword puzzles with the challenge, "See if you can work this without reference books." I couldn't. And every letter I sent to her came back with commentary, not just on the content, but on structure and word choices as well. I addressed my letters for ten years to Sister Ruth. My assistant thought Ruth was a nun.

I finally took the time to meet Ruth face to face. I had a meeting in Seattle and, based upon the fact that Ephrata looked like it was less than halfway across the state, I thought I could rent a car and drive over in an hour or two. Turns out that states in the West are bigger than states in the East. It was about five hours over the mountains to the Grand Coulee, but it was well worth the effort.

It was no wonder that Ruth wrote so well. She lived in the high desert where, “Lassiter might have come riding out of the purple sage with his guns in the scabbards on his hips.”

Because of Sister Ruth, today I read and enjoy women authors. She even emboldened me to exchange books (and opinions) with my women friends. A few months ago I received the start of an autobiography by a friend who feels the need to write about her journey as a woman and a protestant living in Khartoum in the early sixties. Her biggest challenge was to deal with the assumptions she had grown up with about pagans and heathens. She learned quickly that many who she met were just as smart, just as strong and just as energetic as she – and that any version of heaven that left these good people out could not be acceptable.

So, I continue my education. I look at history around the world and I see leaders like Golda Meier, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher and Angela Merkel, who are the match for any male president that we have elected. Based upon my learnings I have a vision of a future where we will embrace a broader view of talent in seeking our leaders.

I bring this writing forward not to convince you that I have advanced further than you, but to share with you the power and the fun that I have found on the journey. Looking back, I mostly spent my life in clubs that excluded women and I now regret my loss.

And so I return to my mother. I am certainly living proof of the smartest thing that Ralph Waldo Emerson ever said: “Men are what their mothers make of them.” My mother grew up in a time and place where women didn’t go to college. My mother not only got a college degree - before me, she was the only person on either side of my family to earn a degree - but when she graduated during World War II, she was offered a full scholarship to continue her education in aeronautical engineering. Most of my success can be connected back to her parents refusing to support her in taking that scholarship. She became a teacher. And; she kept the books for our family construction company; but because she was a girl she got paid for her book keeping with a crisp one hundred dollar bill each Christmas.

My mother decided early on that I would live the life that she was not allowed. As a teenager I had no more interest in attending college than any of my other male relatives. We all had paying jobs in the family construction business and I planned to live out my life right there. Except for Mom I would have done just that. When I was seventeen she sat me down and said, “I need to tell you something.”

I said, “What?”

She said “You have been accepted to the engineering school at the University of Cincinnati.”

I replied, “That’s odd, because I didn’t apply.”

She said, “I didn’t wait on you; I applied for you. Now you need to know my plan. I will support you in anything you want to be in life. But, if you come home without an engineering degree, I plan to kill you in your sleep. So, make a decision.”

So, I took my pickup truck and headed off to UC – and the rest is history – including my deciding to write about the impact that women have made in my life.

I end with my Mother’s favorite Bible verse. Growing up I heard it at least once a day. It was, “The Lord helps those who help themselves,” which of course is not in the Bible. Evidently, Ben Franklin plagiarized the phrase for “Poor Richard’s Almanac” from an Englishman named Algernon Sidney.

Thinking I would put Mom in her place, I did the research to establish that it is not a Bible verse and told her so. To which my mother replied, “How do you know what was in the Bible; the Bible was translated by a committee made up of men. There is plenty of evidence that committees made up of men, never get things right.”

I, like you, owe my life to a woman. That is a matter that deserves reflection.

Pete Strange

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