

The Line Between Conditional and Unconditional Love

My mother was insane, she killed herself and drove my sister to suicide. My dad was a career Army officer with combat experience. My mom was lightning in a bottle, exploding without warning, while my dad was an empty vessel unable to communicate.

My mother's mother was who saved me. In later life I was lucky enough to find mentors who guided me to a successful career and life, but she was the only one who came through every time. We would visit during the summer to the town she lived in, and ran a beauty salon.

When I was 11 or 12, she made me her assistant on Saturdays (a big day salon-wise). So I got to wash the hair of her customers before she turned them into dazzling perfect temptresses and they left to go hunting with optimism restored.

Such an experience at that age opens up doors of perception I don't need to describe, and helped me decipher some of the mysteries of femininity. It always energized me, like the pure physicality of the salon and the music-like operetta, with the ladies dancing and Gaggy encouraging them. She knew what a party was about, and people knew she knew, which allowed me to have fun and relax.

One story defines her wit and determination perfectly. Her husband had a barber shop near the lake, while the nearby yacht club in Central Illinois although small, served the purposes of privacy and secrecy well. The club was connected to the mainland by a one lane causeway (this was the 30's, so one lane still sufficed for many purposes). She found out when he'd be having lunch with his new paramour (a married lady of a certain social standing) and drove to the head of the causeway on the land side, waiting.

When the other car approached, she put her car in gear and drove down the middle of the causeway pointing directly at the other car, resulting in the other woman's tipping her large, boxy car (the 30's, remember) onto its side in the ditch, with her on the down side. Gaggy got out of her car, knelt down and shouted, as her husband wrenched his door open, "Come on over, Roy. I don't think she's got much left for you. Take my hand." That's unconditional love in the context of acceptance and forgiveness, which should speak for itself but somehow never loud enough to move the dial much.

When my daughter was 6 months old, we lived across from the American Museum of Natural History where they blow up the balloons for the Macy's Day Parade, as all N'Yorker's refer to it. Maya was in a baby carrier, strapped to her mom's chest, when Susan was attacked by a deranged resident of the "Halfway House" at the end of our block. The man had a large Spanish corkscrew, mostly wood but with the screw-tip poking out. When she fell down to protect the baby he popped her 6 times in the back. They apprehended him promptly and put him in jail. He had previous convictions, to no one's surprise.

My downstairs neighbor was the publisher of the New York Times. I got a number from him to report this crime and complain about the presence of such a fellow on our fine block.

The Times ran a half page article that Sunday. My grandmother lived in Winder, GA, where the city hall has an enamel sign with Coca Cola bottle caps at each end, next door to a business called "Bob Jones's Radial Tire -- Formerly City Recappers." Somehow she'd gotten the news in a single day!

I knew her voice immediately, and said hi and I'm fine and then she asked "But how are Susan and the Baaabee?" I told her they were doing OK. The baby was fine and Susan was recovering and in

treatment. Then she asked, in her high, reedy voice, "But how about the fella?" I responded that they had him in custody and he was sure to get what was coming to him. Our family came thru the Cumberland Gap with Daniel Boone in 1747. The first half of her life was lived in Kentucky, where guns were saved for shooting game and people are taken care of with knives. There was a long pause at her end, 30 seconds that felt like an hour. I had no problem understanding her meaning when she finally said "Well, just be careful how you do it" blew me a kiss and I blew one back and hung up. That meant that we were on the same page. She trusted me absolutely, to take care of matters as needed, leaving it in my hands. Unconditional trust is part of unconditional love, and we could operate on parallel paths, which in any meaningful sense we were without question.