

Let Their Wisdom Flow Through Me

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Abstract

Here I stand, on the solid ground of wisdom set down for me by the generations of women in my family. These women have been the foundation of my life and have shared their wisdom with me through their poems, letters, recipes, and daily conversations since my earliest memories. I painted myself, poised to write, with their photographs behind me as a network of support and their written word ahead of me as the guiding light into my own emergence as a woman. My own words are written on the paper in my hands, and they serve as the base layer on my face. These words were taken from a journal I kept during my first year teaching at the college level, over twenty-five years ago.

The photographs along the right side are pictures of the women who have so greatly influenced my emergence into womanhood. My paternal Great-Grandma Rose wears her flamboyant hat in the photograph positioned just above me. At the top-right is a picture of my mom, Linda Lorraine, holding my infant self. Pictures of my early years are placed just below. The next photograph is of my paternal Great-Grandma Rose with her oldest child, my Grandma Rose. Beneath their photo lies a picture of my maternal Great-Grandma Sarah with her twin daughters: my Great-Aunt Edith and my Great-Grandma Lillian Lorraine. In the bottom-right corner I placed a photo of my Grandma Rose with her son, my dad, Fredrick. Finally, the three children at the bottom are my older sister, Jill Rose, my younger brother, Todd Fredrick, and me, Jacqueline Lorraine.

The strong women in my life shared their wisdom with me in many powerful ways. My paternal Grandma Rose, whose recipe for banana cake is included on the collage, passed along her wisdom through her sharing of the domestic arts. I often hear her voice whisper to me, "Remember to always clean from the top down." These words have served as a metaphor in a variety of ways. Her photograph on the collage shows her standing as an adolescent next to her mother. It was taken a year before she was to finish 8th grade and leave home to become a live-in maid due to her parents' divorce. She did not have the privilege of attending high school. My maternal Grandma Lillian (pictured only as an infant on her mother's lap) often wrote short stories and poems, which she would mail to me. Her poem, "Just an Old Black Cat," is included on the collage. She was a role model for the

gentle power of creativity. My Great Aunt Katherine (not pictured), the younger sister to my Grandma Rose, also cherished the arts. Her poem, titled "Reminiscence," (dated April 1935) and her crayon drawing of the mill stream (dated 1928) are both included on the collage in homage to her place in my heart. My mom writes beautiful letters to me and has always supported my work, and so I've included one of her lovely notes, "Dearest Girl," in the collage, too. Finally, my own children, whose wisdom they've inherited from the strong women in their family, are also represented here. My daughter, Sabrina, wrote a sweet note to me on the side of a wooden box that demonstrates the power of literacy, my life's work, in a young child's life. And my son, Liam, wrote a Valentine's Day poem to my husband and me during his high school years, expressing his thoughts on the meaning of love. So, here I stand, the first in my family to earn a college degree, on the strong foundation of wisdom given to me so freely by the powerful women in my family. They taught me that wisdom comes from many sources and takes on many forms. They taught me to believe in my power to carry on their wisdom and use it to create my own source of knowledge and strength for my children. Every day, their wisdom flows through me.