

THE MOTHER LODE

A Sermon Preached by Pamela Patton
with a second part by Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

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My three children are all young adults now. My youngest, Katya, is headed to college this year. I enjoy immensely relating to them as mature, independent people who have interests unfamiliar to me and who manage significant hurdles I only find out about afterwards. I'm enjoying this new chapter of our relationships. And yet I miss their younger years for many reasons, not the least of which was the absolute comfort I used to have with spying on them.

When my children reached the age where they wanted to spend time in their rooms alone, I relied on "tidying up their rooms" to see what I might stumble across. I once found a note that started off "Dear God, I would prefer to move to Queens to live with my babysitter Sita. She is much nicer to me than my mom."

My life as a spy reached an all time high when we were home during the pandemic. It was so distracting. All of the sudden all three of them were home all day, and I could hear from outside their doors—I'd get to hear all the teachers, the students responding, the breakout discussion groups, the conversations after classes with friends, the coaching sessions for sports. I mean this was a feast.

I followed the dreamy collaboration between my daughter who was in middle school and a friend. They decided to keep a daily journal of their activities during the pandemic, filled with drawings and Covid data from the news, and their daily schedules (which included their Xbox Dance Revolution competitions). They discussed how one day they would show the journals to their grandchildren who could learn what life was like during this historic time of the Covid pandemic. What an image of my 13 year old as a grandma paging through her sweet doodles with my descendants whom I'll never know.

One of my children got into a little trouble at school for liking an Instagram post that was controversial. He had to meet with a school administrator at an appointed time on Zoom to discuss the matter, and I was right on time for the appointment, listening off camera. Their

conversation deepened my empathy for the weight our children bear as they develop their own minds and form relationships in the context of social media.

And during normal times when my children were out and about, I could track them on their phones, as if my curiosity about their whereabouts could make them safer. Elizabeth Stone wrote “Making the decision to have a child - it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.” I could watch my phone to see my ambulatory hearts making their way around New York City. (I almost never did because I didn’t want them to rely on my spying to stay safe.)

I want to know every nook and cranny of my children’s experience, I want to know their struggles and their wisdom, their mistakes, their motivations. Lucky for me, my parents’ curiosity about my life is equally insatiable. My mom would be happy to listen to me download every detail of my life for hours; she is never bored with even the most mundane elements. And I’m pretty sure I come by my spying habits honestly—no doubt she read my elementary school diaries despite the fancy ersatz locking system and the tiny key I hid in my desk.

My dad must have asked me thousands of times, “Penny for your thoughts.” He always asked so sweetly. He died before I had children, and I only came to understand as a mother what a deeply loving question that was.

I am lucky to have doting generous parents, but so many of us do not share that blessing. American writer Anne Lamott is not a fan of a narrow view of Mother’s Day for this reason. She writes, “my main gripe with Mother’s Day is that it feels incomplete and imprecise. The main thing that ever helped mothers was other people mothering them, including aunts and brothers; a chain of mothering that keeps the whole shebang afloat...I don’t want [flowers and chocolate] on Mother’s Day if you’re not going to give them to all the people who helped mother children.”

One of the people in my own chain of mothering is a woman I only had contact with for eight months about 15 years ago. Trudi Hirsch was my chaplaincy internship supervisor when I worked at St. Luke’s Hospital. She took a deep interest in the well being and development of our crew of five chaplain interns—she asked questions that were magically incisive, she listened with such concentration and tenderness that I can still remember how it felt to be with her. One late afternoon we interns and Trudi were all squeezing into the elevator after one of our intense daylong sessions, and one of us proposed we call her Mother Trudi because she was so tuned into

our growth. We knew Trudi did not have children of her own. She immediately and firmly said “Oh, no! I am not your mother, and you do not want me to be your mother. Trust me.”

After my internship was over, I never saw Trudi again. She moved on, but she made her mark on me. She set an example for me as a minister and as a person. Whether she likes it or not, I consider her a mother figure. Trudi was what David Brooks would call an Illuminator in his book *How to Know a Person*.

Pastor Jimmy from this morning’s reading is also an Illuminator. Not all of us are the types to approach Mrs. Dorsey with such effervescent energy—“Mrs. Dorsey, you’re the best! You’re the best! I love you! I love you!”--there are many ways to create a feeling of hospitality when we encounter other people.

Brooks defines Illuminators as offering “a gaze that says, ‘I want to get to know you and be known by you.’ It’s a gaze that positively answers the question that everybody is unconsciously asking themselves when they meet you: ‘Am I a person to you? Do you care about me? Am I a priority for you?’...It’s a gaze that radiates respect. It’s a gaze that says that every person I meet is unique, unrepeatable, and yes, superior to me in some way.”

My children taught me the practice of Illuminationism. As they grew up I saw how mothering them had transformed the lens through which I could interact with all people. They were my first subjects, but I realized they are relatively easy to learn from because I feel completely responsible for them. As my spiritual life deepened, I felt I needed to somehow even out my love for my children with my love for others. I had more than enough love for them so perhaps I could lower it a notch to have more available for others. I asked a spiritual teacher how to work on this, and her answer was a life changing epiphany. She suggested I increase my love for all others to bring them up to the same level as my children.

I continue to be extremely curious about my children, while knowing that their independence is as crucial to their well being as my dependable love. I’ll always want to talk with them about the big questions: “What decisions are you thinking over? Who do you admire right now?” And because our answers to the big questions are always changing, I’ll keep asking. I want to know their answers, and I want to know yours.

My children have taught me how to know a person, how to aspire to be an Illuminator. And you’ll be relieved to know that I’ve learned it’s not necessary to spy.