

Growing Up

My mother found me to be a challenge from the day I was born. I didn't conform to what she thought babies should do: my older sister had demonstrated a high level of conformity that I failed to reach. Now, in hindsight, I admit that if I had stood in my mother's shoes caring for a baby with the same characteristics that I had, then I would have been concerned too.

I learned to sit up as was normal. But I decided that I had achieved the ultimate challenge and quit making any further developmental progress. I sat there on the floor and the family maneuvered around me like planets circumnavigating the sun. I celebrated my first birthday, sitting on the floor. I failed to comprehend the intrigue of standing, walking or running. Sitting was my thing. When I reached the age of eighteen months, I continued to cause my mother anxiety as I remained firmly in place. Nothing, not cajoling, not pleading, not dictating, nothing sparked the slightest interest in movement. I sat.

In frustration and with a growing sense of fear, my mother took me to the doctor expecting a dire diagnosis. After a thorough examination, the doctor sat my mother down, looked her in the eyes and pronounced his opinion – your baby is lazy. Despite my early age, I was dismayed by this diagnosis: I felt I deserved a diagnosis that was rooted in Latin or Greek. But, no, I had been labeled as lethargic.

This was not the result that my mother wanted or believed. She took me to two child specialists, who were rare resources in London in the early 1950s. They both pronounced me to be a perfectly healthy, but becoming chubby, indolent infant.

From my perspective, as a two-year old, I felt insulted and took umbrage. To show my upset with this “lazy” label, I decided to continue sitting on the floor and refuse to move. My

mother could not accept my non-activity. She feared having to look after me for the rest of her days. Soon, I became just another piece of furniture, except it was located in the middle of the living room floor causing everyone else to need to avoid it.

When I was about 2½ years old, my mother walked into the living room, crossed to the bookcase and paused. She turned quickly to browse the floor and let out a little scream. The lump that belonged in the middle was not there. She found me standing next to an armchair with a big grin on my face. She let out a large sigh, picked me up, and gave me a huge hug.

She was very relieved by my change of heart, but after my first couple of years, she had learned to not trust me to conform to standard expectations. Soon enough, I became a normal little boy; I ran everywhere, which prompted my mother to plead with me to sit still, once in a while. Of course, I loved the irony in that.

When I turned five years of age, I joined the first year at the local elementary school. I blended in with all of the other kids and my mother breathed more easily. At last, she could see her little boy was just like the others. He was not unusual, he was not exceptional, he was just an average member of the school class.

At the start of the second year of school, all parents were invited to attend a large celebration to commemorate the school's 50th anniversary. We children were packed into rows on the floor, in the front of the gym while all of the parents were gathered on chairs in the rear. As it was a celebration, the school had invited the town's Lord Mayor to speak on the functioning of the town council – a dumbed-down version for small children.

Everyone sat transfixed while the mayor droned on about civic duties. I stared out of the window, bored. Finally, he concluded his speech, which in reality had lasted barely ten minutes.

He looked expectantly down at the sea of little faces and said, “Well, children, I hope you found that interesting. Do any of you have a question for me?”

Without a moment’s hesitation, my hand shot up into the air. Everyone in the gym looked at my hand wavering in the air because it was the one, and only, hand held aloft. My mother and father realized it was my hand. They sat up proudly as if to say, “*That’s my son’s hand. Where’s your child’s hand? Our Barry, he’s a bright pupil.*” My parents gloated.

The mayor had a relieved look on his face as he probably had expected absolutely no questions. He had scored: one question was better than the last couple of presentations he had given. The headmaster waved at me to stand up. I understood and scrambled to my feet, looking over my shoulder to catch the eyes of my glowing mother and father. The mayor smiled directly at me and seemed to ooze his invitation “Ah, sonny, what would you like to ask me?”

I looked back at him, but was still thinking about the window, and asked in a confident manner, “Please, sir, how do they make glass?”

The mayor’s smile melted as he tried to find a connection between civic duties and glass. Our headmaster rescued him by standing and waving at me to sit down, immediately. The mayor regained himself, smiled uncomfortably, and bravely invited any other questions. None were forthcoming.

I’m not totally certain that the earth didn’t open up to consume my parents in their moment of utter embarrassment. Soon the assembly finished. Our parents left while the children were escorted back to our classrooms.

As far as I can remember, my mother and father never mentioned that celebration to me ever. To them, it never happened. This incident confirmed my mother’s suspicion, I could be

depended on in one way - to do whatever other kids would not. My mother always loved me, but lived in trepidation of what I had in mind.

As I reached my mid teenage years, I realized the less my mother knew about me, the better. Additionally, confusing hormones were surging through my body. I was a mess. I also realized other friends liked the same girl as me. I needed to be positive and confident, which was the last thing I felt capable of being.

I cycled to where Pat, the girl of my dreams, lived to ask her out. Unfortunately, she fancied a good friend of mine more than me, and so, I received the first of many refusals. Dejected, I walked down the path to the curb. I got on my bike and started riding down the road, rephrasing everything I had said to Pat. They all had far better outcomes. Feeling like a total failure, I pedaled faster away from the scene of my demise. Being lost in such misery, I forgot one detail. The road turned sharp right and there was a six-foot high brick wall right along side it. I rode straight into it.

I decided to totally humiliate myself. I carried my bent bike back to Pat's to ask for a couple of pieces of tape to stop the bleeding. Pat answered the door, looked at me, turned around and called, "Mom, I think this is for you," and walked upstairs.

After limping home, Mother saw the bandages, but chose to not enquire about them. She knew that she would not believe what I had to say. I was thankful for her not asking as it would have been embarrassing to admit that truth.

The day that I started my first job and moved to a different part of England, my mother breathed a sigh of relief, with the thought, "*He's not my problem any more.*"