

## **Mom, The Amazing, aka Sharon Ann**

*(VanRiper or Reyes, depending on which side of 1969 you met her)*

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If imitation is truly the most sincere form of flattery, then my mom deserves to feel truly & sincerely flattered. After nearly a decade diving deeply into her career as a nurse, she chose to set it aside and refocus all her energies on raising her kids & running the household around her growing clan. (Although she made sure to keep her nursing license active & put in lots of hours over the years as a fill-in nurse and/or receptionist at my dad's medical office.)

As it turns out, all three of those kids (my two sisters & me) have followed in her footsteps: diving deeply into our careers, then taking time away from them to refocus all our energies on raising our kids & running the households around our growing clans. I cannot help but believe that it's because she gave so much to us that made our growing up so rich in support & love, that we all felt compelled to find a way to give something like that to our own children.

Of course, I'll be the first to admit—even though I've tried to imitate her extraordinary skill in the raising kids & running a household, she is still much more the master. To this day, I know of no one with a more detail-oriented approach to those multifaceted realms of parenting & home-running. Oh, the details she has detailed—and we'll get to some of the more extraordinary ones shortly, I promise.

But before detailing the details she's detailed, let's take a little detour... Because I think sometimes that people unconsciously misinterpret my mom's choice to stay home & raise a family as an indicator that she wasn't an adventurous young woman. In fact, I have to confess that in my youth I probably made this same unknowing assumption.

Then in my 20s, as I started to face the world on my own, I suddenly saw her 20s through her eyes. After spending her entire sand-dunes-along-Lake-Michigan youth in an idyllic, peak-post-war Muskegon, she moved alone to the brawny heart of Chicago (to a neighborhood near Mt. Sinai Hospital, where she was able to see the tanks rolling through the streets during the 1968 Democratic convention). That is not the choice of an unadventurous young woman.

After meeting and marrying her Filipino-doctor husband in Chicago, she packed up to begin her new life & start her new family *in the Philippines*. Specifically, Cebu City—which was not, in 1969, anything close to the metropolis it is today. And she had her first child there, on an island of jungles & mountains on the far side of the world. These are unquestionably the choices of an adventurous young woman.

She might've stayed in the Philippines too, raising her young family on that faraway island—but Marcos' martial law intervened, and my parents moved back to the U.S. in 1971 to escape the government's closing fist. Truth be told: moving to a faraway, foreign island in a still-developing, not-entirely-stable nation & starting my new family there is not an adventure I'd have been willing to embark upon. I just don't have my mom's *cojones*.

(However, one of my sisters *did* choose to live in Belgium for a couple years during her 20s—at least some of my mother's overseas adventurousness made it to the next generation.)

And so it wasn't along the sands of Cebu, but among the cornfields of northern Illinois that my mom embarked upon her next adventure: raising & running a family—with an amazing combination of love, commitment & *precision* that I've learned first-hand is impossible to replicate.

You might think that, being her son, I'm simply engaging in some highly-biased hyperbole when I say these kinds of things—but those details I promised, they'll make easy work of your doubt. Of course beneath all those details, first & foremost, was the surety of her unconditional love—while we

were growing up, through her words & actions, her care & belief, she gave us that certainty & unchangeability of her love. It was, in short, the strongest foundation that a child could start a life upon.

Throughout our childhood, she demonstrated that love in endless ways. One of the most obvious was her commitment—to being there for everything, always. There wasn't a single pick-up or drop-off, performance, competition, ceremony, award, meeting, or anything else amongst the never-ending list of our childhood events, excursions & activities that my mom wasn't present for.

She was completely & totally there for us. Not only present at the actual happening, but there to talk us through & help prepare us for anything beforehand, and there to celebrate or console or analyze together afterwards. In every corner of my childhood memories of all those things, there she is—watching, beaming, cheering, admiring, loving.

It is hard to quantify the boundless warmth & security that can bring to a childhood—having that matter-of-fact but rock-solid faith in her being there for whatever, whenever, without question. I can say now looking back that even though I understood it as a child, I still took it for granted in a way. Until I became part of the parenting world myself, I simply didn't understand the luxury of being a kid who never even thought to doubt my mother's total commitment to being there.

And she was more than just present at places & events, but present at home in all those childhood hours in between them. She didn't treat us like her responsibilities to care & cook for, but as her companions in those evenings, weekends & long summer afternoons. My memory of my childhood (& into my adulthood) is a decades-long ongoing conversation with her, touching every topic I can think of.

One of my earliest memories of in-depth discussions with her about the world was the Presidential election of 1976, when I was still just in 1st grade. In those early conversations, I didn't feel like a child being told by my parent how to

think about the world, but as someone whose own thoughts & opinions mattered to her—as someone who she was talking *with* about these things, not an unknowing child who she was talking *to* about them. And as anyone who ever met that little me knows—I was a *talker*. But despite the infinite strings of words I would spout, my mom always made me feel like I was being heard.

Of course, it wasn't just politics & worldly events that we talked about together—that ongoing childhood-spanning conversation covered books, movies, TV shows, music, sports (lots & lots of Bears), friends, family, girlfriends, school, advice, my writing, our ideas, our dreams, and our biggest questions about the universe & being.

From the time when I was that littlest of talkers, there has never been anything that I didn't want to have a conversation with my mom about—we've covered it all together. And they are some of my warmest, simplest memories from my kid life—just sitting together with her in the family room on some lazy, timeless evening after dinner, maybe watching a show, and talking, always talking about something.

But I promised to tell you about the details, the *precision* that I have so admired & have hopelessly, unsuccessfully tried to replicate in my own parenting journey. One of the less glamorous truths about parenting is that all those ways that you can provide a foundation of support & comfort & security are not just emotional—unglamorously put, they're *structural*. Knowing that dinner will always appear on time, clothes will be folded, fees will be paid, appointments made, schedules coordinated, school supplies acquired, rides given, entertainment provided, and when needed, encouragement to wander the woods on your own. All of that & so much more minutia of family life provide the scaffolding that surrounds & supports a dreamy childhood, and my mom was the master of that entire domain.

Even more impressively, she made it seem effortless—a machine so well-oiled that it never even crossed your mind that someone needed to be there to oil it. Every week of my childhood, her schedule was imperturbable. All laundry tasks

had a day & time of day, clothes arrived clean & folded in their designated places without fail, sheets & towels kept their own exacting clock, hangers were counted and readied for their fresh from-the-dryer occupants, and whites & colors never crossed paths in their efficiently-sorted cycles.

Dinners were planned ahead & prepped on schedule, meats taken with exact timing from the freezer to be defrosted, school lunches always at hand on the way out the door, snacks stocked the pantry for our return, and grocery lists were made & fulfilled with a ruthless never-an-empty-fridge-moment efficiency.

Her relentless schedule also included slots for watering the myriad plants, slots for cleaning each room in the house, feeding the pets, cleaning the kitty litter, paying the bills, turning over the calendars (a special obsession of hers), bath nights, bed-time routines, and on, and on, and on. A precision clockwork of daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly tasks all executed flawlessly & without fail according to their predesignated order. And as someone who (theoretically) attempts to cover a similar landscape for my own family—I am constantly in awe of just how much exponentially more exacting her routine was than the one I have cobbled together over the years. It is not for lack of trying, but I have simply found her example of effortless completeness & precisely-scheduled timing to be an unreachable holy grail of parenting. I can't imagine anyone having done it all better.

And more than just doing it all—*she recorded it all*. In my parents basement are shelves filled with spiral-bound notebooks, planners, datebooks, calendars, ledgers, and manila-folder-sorted papers that she used over all those years to record & detail every monthly budget (down to the penny), every appointment & event, every drop-off & pick-up, every sleepover, every trip, every everything. I could go down into that basement right now and use her records to almost instantly find what was happening during any week of my childhood. And about those trips...

My mother's amazing obsessiveness over detailing the details has always reaching a particular zenith on our many vacations over the years. First, there were the maps. My mom loves maps. On every trip she has always had a hefty collection on hand—atlasses that covered the main arteries across the nation and individual state maps that could be navigated in greater detail, plus any site-specific maps for locations to visit. And she used them all to pre-plan routes, look for alternates, track progress, and measure time-&-distance-to-destination.

But time & distance details weren't just measured on maps, they have been recorded in her special vacation notebooks—where she recorded the length of stretch we drove, the timing & location of every stop we made, every gallon of gas filled, every dollar spent along the way, every site visited, every route taken, every hiccup along the drive, every meal eaten, every activity undertaken, every vacation day's events chronologically chronicled. Just like those planners & datebooks, I could go down to that basement right now & use her vacation notebooks to almost instantly find where & when we stopped for lunch along the roadside on any vacation (and the miles per gallon that we got on the way there). I can still hear her frustration from the passenger seat on that rare occasion when we pulled out of gas station before she could write down the numbers on the odometer when we pulled in—*Oh, Sugar Jets! I forgot to check the mileage! Leo, did you notice what the odometer was?*

And no discussion of my mom's precise schedules & her delight in the details would be complete without another one of her obsessive (& now oh-so-old-school) specialities: *cards*. Not the playing type, but the birthday type, the holiday type, the every-milestone-you-could-think-of type. One of the many details that have always littered her datebooks & calendars are all those milestones that 21st-century humans have mostly relegated to social media reminders: every cousin, aunt, uncle, grandparent, or close friend's birthdays, anniversaries, graduations, etc., etc.

Year-after-year, she has picked out her person-specific cards & made sure they all made it into the mail in time for their special day. And people noticed her

taking the time to show that she remembered & cared—to this day, when cousins of mine see her they'll share their gratitude for her years & years of post-marked gestures of affection. Her never-failing devotion to showing her affection for family & friends through those hundreds of cards is another amazing ongoing effort that I have always been awed by.

And that's not even taking into consideration her annual herculean Christmas card routine—the card table set-up in the family room, boxes of different cards (tailored for each specific group of recipients), and the stapled hand-gridded, hand-written pages with dozens of names & addresses (meticulously updated) and the columns drawn along the side for check marks indicating which recipients had sent a card to us that year too. Like the datebooks, planners & vacation notebooks, I could down into my parents' basement right now and almost instantly find who received a Christmas card from our family in any given year (& whether or not we got one from them). When I say that my mom has loved detailing all the details, I am not exaggerating.

In fact, I could go on (and on)—just another small rattle of my memory and out fall more recollections of her numbered, exacting obsessions: painstakingly counting up & evenly dividing all candies, treats & toys in any Easter baskets & eggs, Christmas stockings, and Halloween hand-outs, then doing the same with elaborate boxes containing holiday goodies for the grandkids' baskets & stockings, assembling fully-maxed-out portions for school lunches, arranging her stacks of to-be-read novels (which she devoured nightly) in the order in which they were to be read. And so much more... but I think by now I've convincingly made my case on the matter.

And although she has been drawn to her precise schedules & routines like a magnet, my mom has also been equally adept at jumping into the unplanned fray that's an inevitable part of raising a family—helping to manage, untangle (or cajole forward to completion) any bout of sudden chaos seeking a solution. Whether it was staying up late to help me glue down the dike on my frantically-assembled last-minute poster-board replica of the town in “Wheel on the School” or finding a way to focus me on finishing my too-many-undone

spelling packets the night before their due date or pulling together an unwieldy homemade raven costume for the school play—like all of her other everyday victories over the vicissitudes of parenting, the examples are endless.

Looking back at those years growing up in our gloriously curated & cared-for home life, I don't know how she did it all. Her time shepherding us through our childhoods is a monument to what it can mean to be a mom, and how to pull it all off with combination of affection, completeness, flawlessness & grace that should not be able to be contained together in a single person. She may have been forced to retreat from her long-ago adventure to a far off island, but she dove in full-force to the real journey that awaited her stateside, and she remained headstrong & steadfast on her way through that adventure.

In my own journey down that path, I may not have been able to replicate what she did, but I still learned from her everything I know about raising a family. And part of what I learned is that it's okay that I have not been able to match her mastery. Thanks to the surety of her love, I feel secure in simply being who I am, and I know that the most important thing I can do is provide that same unfailing love & support—so my girls can grow up with that security in being okay with who they are & facing the world as best they can. She did everything she could to give us that foundation, so it only seems right to give the same to my children.

I still cook many of her recipes for my own girls, count the chocolates in the Easter baskets, talk *with* them & not *to* them, try to be there for everything like she was, to give them a matter-of-fact faith that they can count on me to be present, to lodge in their minds warm memories of lazy evenings sitting together & sharing thoughts after a good dinner—but all those exacting details that my mother detailed, most of that they've had to do without.

Although I know *it's okay* that they've made this journey without all those details, I still like to regale them with tales of how my mom did it—to give them some sense of the magic carpet that I was so lucky to ride through my childhood. And to let them know the astounding-ness of what their grandma



has done over all these years, to show them what is *possible* when following that path of setting a career aside to raise a family & build a home life to wrap around it. To help them understand that the bounty that's sown & reaped from living a life like mom's can be infinitely plentiful, seeding bounties & joys of generations to come through endless acts of love—in all forms & every detail.

Quite simply, watching her do what she has done, I've been a witness to greatness. She is Mom, The Amazing. I could not be more grateful, and I could not love her more.

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