

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES
by Linda Seger

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Illustrations by Linda Crawford

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"When you're afraid of doing something, just remember: if other people have done it before, you can probably do it also."

By Mama Agnes Thompson from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

When I was seven, my favorite aunt, Aunt Agnes came to visit us in our little town in northern Wisconsin. She had a spirit of adventure, even well into her 80s, and was one of my favorite people. During this visit, she suggested that we go to the park at 6 AM and have a breakfast picnic. We never heard of such a thing but we were game for a bit of adventure. So the next morning we got donuts and milk and took our picnic to the park and sat at a picnic table overlooking the Peshtigo River. She then decided we needed one more adventure for the morning and decided that we would go to the lighthouse on Lake Michigan which was in a neighboring town about 12 miles away. We walked down this long concrete pier to the lighthouse and my aunt knocked on the door. The lighthouse keeper open the door and she said, " We'd like to see the light house. He said, "Okay," and invited us in.

First, he showed us the small living area on the first floor and then we went upstairs to a second floor that had a little balcony. From the balcony, there was a ladder going up to the very top where the big light was kept. I looked up the ladder and I was suddenly very afraid and I told my aunt I didn't want to go up there. She didn't say anything but she took my little hands and she put them on the railing and she said, "You stand right here what we go up and we'll be right back." There was no judgment, no trying to persuade me but simply a kind acceptance. I watched as my sister and my aunt went up that letter. They were up there for just a few minutes and came back down. As we were walking down the long concrete pier going back to the car she put her hand on my shoulder and she said, "If you're afraid of doing something just remember: if other people of done it before, you can probably do it also."

This piece of advice has worked for me all my life. I travel the world and have been in 34 countries as a speaker. I have written books and have consulted with people from all over the world. I have been with the very poor in the Philippines and in Thailand and I have been with the very wealthy. I have been with famous people and with people not so famous and I have often been intimidated. I have often gone into certain circumstances that were not dangerous but were new and sometimes uncomfortable. At those moments, I remember my Aunt Agnes with her hand on my shoulder telling me not to be afraid because other people have done this as well. I have had a good life of adventure as a result.

"You always sing better when you have a full orchestra and a pretty dress."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

When I was growing up in the 1950s in my small Wisconsin town of Peshtigo, we would watch the singers on television. They had beautiful voices and they sounded so wonderful. That kind of

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES

by Linda Seger

talent and ability seemed so beyond me but one day, mother, who was also a lovely singer and a music teacher said to me as she was watching these wonderful singers on television, "You always sing better when you have a full orchestra and a pretty dress." I realized then that many of the people we see doing wonderful things have help. They might have an entourage or they might have a person who knows exactly what clothes the singer should wear or they might have a hairstylist or they might have the full orchestra that helps them sound better. My mother wasn't putting down the singers, because she agreed they were wonderful. But she was helping me understand that anything done well was not just an accident. In fact, as I got older and met some people who were great singers are great actors, I realized the amount of time that went into what they did and I began to be more aware of the whole package that makes it possible for people to do this beautiful work.

Years later, I worked with Linda Lavin who had been the star on the television show *Alice* and who went on for a brilliant Broadway career, winning a Tony award for *Broadway Bound*. One time when we were working together, she mentioned that she was going to be on the Tonight Show in three weeks. She had sung this number many times but she told me she was practicing five hours a day for three weeks to prepare for her five minute performance. I was astounded. I just presumed that people at her level who had sung the song before warmed up and maybe sang it through a few times with the accompanist and then went on stage. Not true. I realize the amount of preparation that went into doing brilliant work. It wasn't an accident. Things didn't just happen. Brilliant performances have a great deal of preparation but they usually also have a full orchestra and a pretty dress.

"If the thing you don't have is money, you're way ahead of everyone else."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

In the 1980s when I was starting my business, I was working so hard and I had so many stresses. I was envious of anyone who seemed to have a business that was going well and had money and was wearing nice clothes and had a good haircut. I complained once to my mother about my lack of money and how I was struggling and my mother said to me, "If the only thing you don't have is money, you're way ahead of everyone else." I realized that I had good friends. I had a good education. I was living in a decent place although it stretched my finances. I had food on the table. I was a spiritual person and was a member of the Santa Monica Friends Meeting and was nurtured by my spiritual community. I had a car and I could get around and I did some lovely things – most of which were free. I thought about people I knew who lead unhappy lives and had few friends and had no adventures but who had plenty of money.

Throughout the years, I have often thought of this because it's so easy to get caught up in a lack of money and when we are struggling or living on the edge. But this wise saying from my mother helped me understand that maybe things weren't so bad because I had a whole lot of other things besides money.

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES

by Linda Seger

"Invest in experiences rather than stocks and bonds. They have a better pay off."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

Mother believed in experiences. Even though we grew up in a small town with few opportunities, she tried to give us experiences. We went to Niagara Falls and I remember that long drive from Wisconsin. We entered music contests and piano contests. If I wanted to learn something, she would try to make it happen. I loved horses and she tried to open up the experience of horseback riding to me even though there were very few opportunities where we lived. We went to a dude ranch in Colorado when I was 13. She brought groups of us together to sing Christmas shows. My whole family hosted house recitals as well as performing other places together.

Throughout my life, I have often thought about the importance of simply saying "yes" to the many experiences that open up opportunities. Experiences enrich our lives.

"Always tip the breakfast waitress well. She's gotten up very early and often is raising children and struggling, but she doesn't get the big tips the waiters get at night."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

My mother helped me have a sensitivity to people who work in service jobs. I had never thought about the difference between the breakfast waitress and the night or evening waiter. She helped open my eyes to the fact that most of the waiters at night are men who receive larger tips, and most of the waitresses in the morning are women. Mother pointed out to me that they often had to get up at 4 or 5 AM to be there with a good smile, pouring coffee, and greeting us with a hearty, "Hello!" Another mama in this book actually added to this advice and said, "Never tip less than three dollars, even if the breakfast is only three dollars." This comes from Mama Shelley Davis, who is the sister of my assistant Katie.

"Life isn't over yet – things often equalize in the end."

By Mama Agnes Seger, from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

Mother often noticed that mothers who had several children try to make everything equal. Once she said to me, "Just because your sister wants a pink sweater doesn't mean that I also get you a pink sweater. You might have some other need. I never said I would take care of all your wants, but I will take care of your needs." My sister and I were very well nurtured by our mother. My sister was a gracious and kind and lovely person who was a year and a half older than I was. At one point in her adult life, my sister said that mother had been helping me out a lot and that she had not been helping her as much. She told mother, "I notice you are doing a lot for Linda and not as much for us." Holly was married and she was in a stable situation and I wasn't married and was starting a business and was in a very unstable situation. Mother then let her know that things equalize in the end.

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES

by Linda Seger

Years later, my sister was diagnosed with ALS (Lou Gehrig's disease) which is a terminal illness for almost everyone except for Stephen Hawking. A diagnosis generally means the person will die within two to three years. Holly tried some very radical medical treatments to see if they would work, knowing that ALS and Lyme Disease often have the same symptoms and sometimes people are misdiagnosed. If it were Lyme disease, these particular antibiotics had a chance of healing her but if it were ALS, they didn't. She was tested and there was unclarity about which it was. During this period of time with Holly's expensive medical treatments, I wrote her a check every month to help pay for medicine and for her trips to the doctor. Sometimes these checks were a thousand dollars. Sometimes they were \$2,000. Every month, I asked Holly what number I should put in that that check and she would very sweetly let me know and was very gracious at acknowledging what I had to give her. During this period of time, I often--yes, many times--thought, "Things equalize in the end."

"Nobody dies when they're supposed to – they either die too soon or too late."

By Mama Agnes Seger, from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

Doctors often diagnose and then give a prognosis about exactly what is expected to happen. With terminal illnesses, they will often say that the person will be dead in two or four months and with other illnesses they tell the patient the expectations. But my Mama taught me that things don't always go how they're "supposed to." I often remembered this quote from her as I would see people living far longer than the diagnosis and as I often saw people that should have had long lives, have their lives cut off by accidents, disease, and in some cases, I had friends or acquaintances who were murdered. I realized that things in life usually don't go according to plan and that many things in life happen earlier than you expect which are sometimes called miracles, and later than you expect, where we often wait so long for something to happen and it doesn't quite happen when we expect.

"Most problems are solvable."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

My mother was very good at analyzing situations. Sometimes she was judgmental about situations as well, and it wasn't unusual for her to decide what somebody should do with their life if their lives weren't working too well. But she also attacked problems. She felt that things are solvable if we think them through and do something.

Since I work very much in the public eye and have an international business, there are many conflicts and tensions and problems. This is probably true anytime we work with people and when we try to make something good happen in our lives. Sometimes, the situations have seemed overwhelming to me but I have thought about my mother telling me that even these kind of things can be solvable.

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES

by Linda Seger

"If someone treats you badly, still treat them like a human being, even if they're not acting like one."

By Mama Linda Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

This is the saying we have in my office. Although most of my relationships with clients and with seminar participants are smooth and lovely, once in a while someone decides to take their frustrations out on me. I have received hate letters at times. I have taken the brunt of peoples' irritations and frustrations with their work, with their lives, or with their relationships. It's tempting to give back as they have given to me. But my assistant Katie and I have continually said that we need to treat all people like human beings, respecting them, even if they are treating us badly. There have been a number of times that this treatment has dissipated the person's anger. In one case, the person wrote me back and said, "You certainly took the wind out of my sails and showed me how you can treat someone with respect."

"You raise children. You don't just let them hang out in your living quarters."

By Mama Katie Gardner from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

My assistant Katie Gardner has two children. Christina is now in her mid-20s and her son Vance is 13 years old. I know Vance better than Christina because Vance lives at home. He is such a sweet boy and Katie seems so to be such a good mother. She opens up opportunities for him. She oversees him and helps him and takes responsibility for the work that he does. Vance is our cat sitter when we travel and Katie comes over with Vance, but lets Vance do all the work with the cat. Vance sells cookies sometimes to raise money for his school and Katie will come with him, but he will do all the talking and filling out the forms. I have seen the beauty of this relationship for some years now and I have often commented on it to Katie, and she clarified, "You raise the children, you don't just let them hang out at home."

"Don't spoil your children rotten. Spoil them good!"

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mama's Taught Us*

My grandmother used to complain to my mother that she was spoiling us. My mother encouraged us and supported us and gave us new experiences. We were not kids that were constantly asking for a new dress or a new piece of jewelry. I don't remember buying a lot of things growing up, although I do remember having enough and not feeling needy. We were loved and cared for. But my grandmother would still think that this was spoiling us until my mother explained to her that this wasn't spoiling us "rotten." This was spoiling us "good."

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES

by Linda Seger

"You don't stop helping your kids because they become adults."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

After I was grown up, there were still problems encountered. And there were many times that my mother came to my aid. When I was 23, I was in a very difficult marriage. After nine months, I decided the whole thing was not workable and I was so depressed and miserable that I decided to leave. I called mother to tell her I would find a way to get to the train station in Pennsylvania and come home. My mother instantly said, "I will leave tomorrow morning at six AM and I will come and get you." Which she did. She helped me get through this very difficult period of time. I moved back home for a few months and got my life started again. There were times that I thought I would fall through the cracks as I was struggling to start a business and were many times during that period of my life mother would help me out – sometimes with a bit of money, sometimes with advice, and sometimes even coming to visit.

I had friends who are struggling like I was and who were in their 20s and 30s. I remember once a friend of mine told her that her mother made it very clear that when she reached 18 years old, the help stopped. I told this to my mother who clarified that you don't stop helping your kids just because they had become adults.

"It's fine to question your religion. If your religion can't stand up to questioning, it's no good anyway."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

A year before I went to college, our friend Judy went off to college. Judy had grown up Catholic and her mother told my mother that Judy was starting to question her religion. My mother let me know that that was just fine.

Through the years, my mother supported my religious quest. I grew up Lutheran but I tried out many churches, starting when I was in high school which was fine with my mother. I attended a Methodist Church and sat with the Zen Buddhists. Eventually in my 20s, I became a member of the Society of Friends ("Quakers"). All of this was fine.

My sister eventually joined the Evangelical Free Church. My mother's father, and grandfather and great-grandfather had all been ministers and theologians and missionaries. There was the possibility in our family of us being very compelled to stay Lutheran and to never leave the church. Although I had great respect for Lutherans and for the beauty of the service, as I matured, I felt drawn to a quieter kind of service, first attending Methodist churches and then Baptist churches and eventually found my way to the Quakers. I did all this with a great sense of freedom which allowed me to make these decisions without any pressure that told me what I was supposed to think or believe and that tried to stop me from asking questions. I always had these words in my mind: if my religion was good, it would stand up to my questions.

WHAT OUR MAMAS TAUGHT US STORIES

by Linda Seger

"It's never too late to change your career."

By Mama Agnes Seger from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

My mother had been a music teacher, teaching piano and voice to students in our home. When I was in high school, she began to teach kindergarten and then went back to music. But when she was in her mid-50s, she decided to go back to school and changed her career, becoming a social worker. This was an inspiration to me all my life because I realized it is never too late. People take up painting when they're in their 60s or 70s. They start writing their first book. My mother took up tennis when she was 60. As a result of the influence of my mother, I went back to horseback riding in my 40s, got my first horse when I was 58 and rode until I was 67. I have been inspired by this idea that we can take up new things, even much later in life.

"If you step on people's hands on the way up the ladder, there's no one to catch you when you fall."

By Mama Jane Wyman from the book, *What Our Mamas Taught Us*

When I was writing my book, *When Women Call the Shots: The Developing Power and Influence of Women in Television and Film*, I interviewed a number of actors and directors and producers and writers in the film industry. One of the people I interviewed was the Academy award-winning actress, Jane Wyman. We went out to lunch together and had a long conversation about women working in the film industry and how they were treated. Jane had been acting since the 1940s, won an Academy Award for *Johnny Belinda* (1948) and had experienced the good and the bad. Jane said there were difficult times people would give her and she would be very direct but diplomatic as she confronted them. She talked about competition in the film industry and about how people often clawed their way to the top. She then explained to me the problem with that kind of behavior. Because if you step on people's hands on the way up, their hands won't be there to catch you when you fall.



Linda Seger is one of the world's foremost script consultants. She is also a speaker, seminar leader and author of 14 books on spirituality and screenwriting.

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