

## **Sophia and Me**

Sara Coumantarakis, January 2020

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I want to dive in. Pay his delinquent utility bill. Fill his bare kitchen cupboard. Force him into drug rehab. But I don't. I lay awake at night wondering how cold he is, how hungry, how lonely.

I thought I knew mothering but nothing I knew applies when a son suffers addiction. Mothering becomes "enabling", which prevents learning from consequences. It takes responsibility off one person's shoulders and puts it where it doesn't belong, on mine.

I put him in Beavers and hockey, found drumming lessons to channel his restlessness. I volunteered at his elementary school and refereed squabbles with his sister. I took him to church and tried to raise him as I had been raised.

Friends tell me he's an adult, to let him go. But in my mind I see his hazel eyes - my eyes, my mother's eyes - looking up at me and holding out his first knocked together birdhouse. I see his chest puffed out as he holds his first fish, his look of astonishment when he hits the ice as his first skates shoot out from under him. It looked so easy, watching others. But it's hard. He is filled with pain so deep that it has swallowed him. My mothering was in vain.

All I did for Sophia was send money to a small ngo in Ghana, supporting education for girls. Its founder spent a year there in the late 1960s and when she returned in middle age, was shocked that little progress had been made to keep girls in school. When I donated money, “my” girl could stay in school. My bits of money flew to Ghana and Sophia matured from a village girl in an uneducated family to a lecturer at a university with a master’s degree.

She shares her big moments. “Hello Mommy, I owe you a duty to present my salary especially the very first one to you. Today I received my salary for my first month of work and I wished you were around, to buy something.”

Then at Christmas time: “Mom, this morning, I woke up to an unusual request from Elsie. She asked me the whereabouts of her grandmother who backed her when she was a baby. I answered Canada. Then she asked if we could come to you when she vacates school on the 19<sup>th</sup>. I answered her no because Canada was far and very expensive. She sat for a while and asked, ‘mama, can I talk to her?’”

I remember that “backing” experience with Sophia trying to tie squirming Elsie onto my back with a large colourful cloth. I kept my hands firmly under her tiny round bottom; sure she would slip from the cloth and

hit the hard Ghanaian ground. I'd watched the women of the village stride confidently down the road, with babies on their backs and huge baskets of nuts on their heads. My experience pushing a stroller across the pavement at a mall was useless.

Since I visited Ghana, Sophia has another daughter and has taken in two nephews after their father died. She asks how my family is when she emails. I say "fine" and spare her the details of parenting two grandchildren for six years when their parents were unable. Those details are fuzzy, overlaid with exhaustion and sadness, intermingled with the wonder and joy of grandchildren.

Why don't I tell her of my heavy depression? Is it false pride or shock that never lessens that my son cannot look after his children? I try to do what Sophia does and step up to the plate, to deal with each day as it comes. But I'm 71 and broken-hearted and she is young and optimistic, as I was at her age. We both want our children to be happy and healthy, to find meaning and love.

My mother, a granddaughter of early Alberta pioneers, never mentioned love or meaning or for that matter, happiness. She was too busy running the Sunday School and the catering group, playing in the community band, taking in nieces and nephews to give their mothers a

break, reminding us that there was a “spanking stick” on top of the warming oven of the old black cook stove. As far as I know, it was never applied to my brothers’ or my bottom, although it may have been deserved.

That world is gone. I live among strangers in a city of nearly a million, not part of a small community where everyone had a vested interest in its children. The bus driver, the teachers, the grocery store owner, the druggist, were all keeping an eye on me! And I knew it. We were sheltered. The only news arrived via the CBC, the Lacombe Globe and gossip on a party telephone line. But we were limited in aspiration. Girls could teach, clerk, or marry a farmer. What else was there?

My favourite T-shirt quotes Socrates, “The only thing that I know is that I don’t know anything.” Most days that is true. But sometimes I know a thing or two about motherhood, about the fierce and unconditional love that allows children to flourish, to push against boundaries knowing they are safe and protected until they are can care for themselves and then their children.

Sometimes it doesn’t work. I don’t know why although I suspect that culture plays a bigger role than I ever imagined. And genetics. And luck. But Sophia and I agree that we’ll do our damndest, as long as we’re alive to pour out never ending love to our kids. To all kids, wherever and whenever possible.