A mother's love

by Thomas C. Fox

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My mother would have been 104 years old today.

We do remember our mothers. My mother's name was Alice. She was Polish and lived to see a Polish pope and the fulfillment of many Polish prayers -- the fall of the Berlin wall. She died the next day, on Nov. 10, 1989, at age 79.

She raised six children (I was the third). She was without a doubt the heart and prime energy source of our family. We were, of course, boldly Catholic. Our religion was an important part of our family identity, perhaps the most important. Mom had a special devotion to Mary and unfailingly took one or two of us each Tuesday evening to St. Sebastian church in Milwaukee for Mother of Perpetual Help devotions.

My father, Clement, was a bit more distant, but no less loving. He was a scientist, a professor or neuroanatomy, and, as all the siblings knew, his research was critically important to him. As a professor at Marquette University Medical School, he taught and researched the brain. He couldn't really talk to us about his work. We didn't understand the words. He wasn't like other fathers. We knew that well. For example, he didn't believe in driving cars, shopping or even taking family vacations. He generally didn't like clergy, unless they were Jesuits or Dominicans, and the ones he liked and respected were usually fellow scientists. He was a Democrat. Catholics were Democrats then.
As I think of my mother today, her toils and worries as a mother -- as I think back on the lives of my parents -- I also think of the ways I could have made their lives easier, the ways I could have lightened their loads a bit. I think of the ways I could have enriched moments of their lives by having been more responsive to their love, more visibly grateful.

Oh, my parents knew I loved them. They knew all of their children loved them. And yet I know now I could have done more, should have done more, to show them my love. And so I carry some regrets.

The Vietnamese have a saying: "Love, like water, runs downhill." What they mean, of course, is that a child can seldom fully appreciate the love of a parent until, of course, that child has children of his or her own. But by that time, most often, it is too late to catch up on lost opportunities.

I think back now of the years I spent in Vietnam during the war and the relatively few times I took the time to write back home. A weekly note, even a few words, could have relieved much worry. What a gift such notes would have been -- and at such a small cost.

Here's a story that characterizes a bit of my mother's love. It helps illustrate her unusual character.

It was her birthday, perhaps 50 or more years ago now. And, as was sometimes the case, I had forgotten it. Nearing 11 that night my phone rang. It was my mother. She was calling, she said, to remind me it was her birthday. She explained she was calling before midnight so that I could wish her happy birthday on her birthday. She said she knew that I would eventually remember and that when I did I would feel bad. And, she said, she did not want me to feel bad.

Now if it were just about anyone else calling to say I was missing their birthday, I would quickly conclude they were calling to make me feel guilty.

Not my mother.

She was calling -- and I knew it -- because she truly didn't want me to feel bad when I eventually remembered!

That's calculated, yes, but with not a hint of malice; indeed, out of a mother's love.

So I write today to celebrate my mother's 104th birthday and to wish her a very happy birthday.

I also write to nudge those of you who have parents today waiting (or not) for some unexpected, special acknowledgement of filial love to take the step.

Send that love back uphill. You'll never regret it.

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