

on being a motherless mother

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"Mom always said don't play ball in the house." Poor Bobby Brady. Those words triple-repeated every 10 seconds for that entire half-hour episode of *The Brady Bunch*. For those of you who have no idea who the Bradys are, we middle-agers who grew up with the Bradys know them as our TV neighbors.

It was Florence Henderson's portrayal of Carol Brady that brainwashed us into painting the portrait of what mom should be: cool, calm, collected, always dressed in polyester pant suits and always having time for her kids at the kitchen table, snack in hand.

Maybe she isn't Carol, but we all have some frame of reference of what a mom should be, based on our own experience. We all have a mother. And although we may not always admit it, we mother the way our mothers did. If your fairy godmother appeared when you were 17 and said you would be just like your mom, you would cringe with complete disgust.

My perspective is poignant, but different. I loved my mother. She was as close to a soulmate as I could have. But in a sick twist of fate, she died after a second bout of breast cancer when I was 28, and my first child, Devin, was 6 weeks old. My world crumbled. Visions I had since I was 6 of being a mommy with her would never be realized. I would never go out to lunch with her and my baby, stroll the mall with her, or ask her to pick the kids up from school or babysit. I spent most of my pregnancy taking her to radiation and chemo, never thinking the final equalizer would mar that amazing time in my life, or more so, the physical bond with that amazing woman I simply called Mom.



MOM Olga Perillo, the author's mom, with baby Linda, right.

As a woman, raising a child without your mother can be a daunting task. My wonderful friend Chris, who shares that dubious distinction with me, calls us "motherless mothers." My human reference book was gone. What did I do when I was 2? How quickly did I potty train? Did I have a lisp when I was 3? Were my tantrums embarrassing like all get-out? I was on my own. I had to figure it all out without the baby coach on call 24/7. I prayed for spiritual enlightenment from her throne in heaven, begging her to send signs, like huge flashes of light on my front lawn or that annoying "this is only a test" TV signal to let me know I was doing OK, the baby was swaddled correctly and I am a good mom.

But now, after having eight children

of my own, ranging from 18 years to 10 months, I realized she was there. Even when she was gone, she was there. She taught me how to mother when I didn't even know she was doing it. All the subliminal absorption was now coming to the forefront. Everything she had said, even if I found it annoying or monotonous or "give me a break!", was now part of my routine with my own children. Her love of cooking and bringing her family to the table each night was now my routine. Her desire to keep up with fashion turned me into a clothes

horse. She kept me in Catholic school my entire school career, and that is where all my kids are. It just happened. She gave all to her family, and she taught me to do the same, without ever telling me in words how to do it.

So, if Bobby Brady were real and Carol Brady moved on to hipper clothes, ditched the station wagon with the wood paneling, he would always remember her words of wisdom

about playing ball in the house. He would remember her after his darling shattered his flat-screen TV (instead of the vase he broke that time). But she would always be there, as any good mother is, even just as a figment.

I thank you, Mom, for teaching me the ropes, even though I didn't realize I was your student. Thank you for teaching me how to love a child, accept his or her faults, and have patience even when I didn't think I had any left. You have been, and always will be, my virtual guide for all mothering past, present and to come. ♦

