

6-19-20 Tribute to My First Health Teacher

It is always with delight and wonder each spring that I discover the lady slippers are in bloom. They never reveal themselves without being accompanied by a jolt of memories. In my mind I am once again the mother of six young children, and we all go outside and draw pictures of the lady slipper. I am fascinated by the results. We all observed the same plant and yet we produced seven different, individual interpretations. Then, I am a little girl talking to my neighborhood friends who didn't go for walks in the woods with their families. I am the one passing along the dramatic warning that it is against the law to pick these special flowers. Perhaps I was meant to be a health agent, after all. As I gaze upon the timely beauty of the lady slipper, I realize that giving warnings, advocating for causes and promoting health all sit on very familiar territory.

I grew up in a time and place where families were grateful to be finally settled in a modest home where they could raise a family. World War II and the Korean War were over, and people were busy staying put and getting ahead at the same time. I was fortunate enough to have a father who loved nature and who needed nature and who made time to teach me about her. At first, I thought, as children do, that my way was everyone's way. I was about ten or twelve years old before I realized that most other children did not take walks in the woods. They did not know edible berries from the poisonous ones, and they did not know about the lady slipper.

It was from my father that I learned the words and concepts of "endangered" and "rare". We delighted in sightings of a blue bird or an otter. Once, while out fishing and floating along on our little rowboat, we saw a copperhead snake, sunning itself on a flat rock. I was struck by colliding impressions. Here was an animal that was beautiful, rare, and dangerous. I was thrilled by this opportunity to see a rare animal and I was in fear of getting too close. I learned that respecting the power of nature was just as important as appreciating its beauty.

My father's words and actions taught me so much. I learned how to use tools, how to be observant, how to care about the quality of my work. I learned about proportions and how to enlarge a map and drawing to scale. He was my original mentor for character, work ethic, the beauty to be found in nature, and the importance of health. I knew what "Gray's Anatomy" referred to before the television show. My father owned and read the book. I learned such health basics as "Lie on your right side with knees bent when you have a stomachache". He showed me where my stomach was on the left side. With this bit of knowledge, I could tell the difference between a stomach problem and an intestinal one. He was a great storyteller, also. Bedtime stories often revolved around the theme of survival. He told a story of a hiker being bit by a poisonous snake and how he cut with his sharp pocketknife an "X" in the skin over the bite. He could then suck the poison out of the bite and spit it out. This was okay if he did not have a cut in his mouth. The story contained many lessons beyond the obvious one of dealing with a snakebite. His survival stories supported the guiding principles of self-reliance and preparedness.

In contrast with his ability and willingness to share his views and knowledge on so many aspects of life, he told me very little about his time spent as a pilot in World War II and the Korean War. I knew that he traded his ration of alcohol (whiskey?) for rations of chocolate. I knew he hated being dirty and would look for opportunities to wash up, whether it was under a dripping roof gutter or at a barrel of rainwater. He was humble about what others considered to be the heroic actions on the part of Captain Edward Vincent Drinan.

Each June, as Father's Day approaches, I smile with gratitude that my father was who he was: a man who returned from war ready to raise a family and full of appreciation for life, for freedom, for nature and all things wonderful.

Each June, I look at the lady slippers and quietly thank my father for teaching me the importance of what really counts in life. His lessons and examples have allowed me to add public health as a worthy cause.

Cathleen Drinan is the Health Agent for Halifax, MA. She can be reached (until June 30, 2020) at 781 293 6768 or cathleen,drinan@halifax-ma.org