

Mothers: Their Influence, Inspiration and Apron Stings

I have before me the heart-warming story of Alferd Williams of St. Joseph, MO. Alferd is so thrilled about learning to read that he plans to repeat the first grade with his teacher, Alesia Hamilton, in the fall. For a student to repeat the first grade is not too unusual, but Alferd is a unique first grader because he is seventy years old. He looks like a friendly giant among his classmates but they love him and accept him with open arms. Alferd's desire to learn to read comes from the promise he made to his mother that he would learn to read. (Full story in Kansas City Star, Saturday, May 3, 2008) At age seventy he knew that if he fulfilled his promise to his mother that he had to take action. I just finished a novel where the hero had a very poor relationship with his mother. She was an alcoholic prostitute and had abandoned him when he was very young. His sense of duty as a son forced him to take a job where his mother lived in order to care for her as she was dying. He felt that he had nothing to say to her and had no feelings or desire to be with her. After the funeral he became aware that he did have strong feelings toward her and he was flooded with regrets for not having tried to develop a good relationship. A young man began abusing alcohol during high school and his mother tried to get him to stop. He got married and had children and heavy drinking caused him to abuse his family. His mother finally said, "Paul, I will not say another word about your drinking. I am going to pray and turn you over to God." Before long Paul stopped drinking and said, "I could resist my mother's words, but crumbled beneath my mother's prayers." An eighty-seven year old widow of two husbands told a group that she could not give herself permission to go alone to a restaurant for a meal. "My mother taught me that a nice girl or woman should not go alone to a restaurant because it might give the impression that she wanted a man to notice her. Her mother's powerful apron strings held her tightly. Apron strings are more powerful than most of us care to admit. Apron strings represent authority, control, security, rewards, punishment, approval and dependence. Codependency can easily develop between mother and child although both may deny that they are the one keeping the knot tied. Loosening the apron string is generally a natural process. Children quickly want to do things their way and this demand for independence gives wise parents many opportunities to teach the child how to become responsibly independent. A parent who becomes threatened when the child moves toward independence may be tempted to overpower the child, which will only tie stronger knots in the apron string. Praise from the parent who catches the child making good choices on their own initiative, raises the child's self-assurance and predicts future growth and affirmative actions. Criticism of the child's move toward independence ties double knots in the apron string. Only a gentle scratching of the surface reveals that most of us have extremely strong apron strings with our mothers. Their positive teachings, strong faith, high morals and other worthy attachments cause us to cling comfortably to our relationship with her. Good news for parents and adult children who are struggling with unhealthy relationships. There are good family counselors that know how to untie troublesome knots and develop mature relationships. Don't cut the strings.