

MAY THE CIRCLE BE UNBROKEN

“And don’t sing the answer,” chided my eight year old daughter, compounding the rejoinder required by her simple inquiry. I had to laugh, because I knew that my habit of responding to my child in song or rhyme was my own mother poking her head through my New York City persona.

There are worse things to recollect about a mother than singing, though, even if, as my Mother persistently declared, *it ain’t the kinda singin’ they do up north yere*. I used to minimize the influence Mama’s upbringing had on my own development. She was raised, after all, in the *holler* at Cow Creek, in Eastern Kentucky. I was born in Kentucky, but grew up in New Jersey and New York. From my perspective, Mama’s songs and recitations were in that corny hillbilly style, or were culled from some *foot stompin’ old time religion*. My songs and rhymes, in contrast, carried import—you know, the anti-war or protest variety, or the poetic ruminations of e.e. cummings or Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Never mind that my daughter once thought she was being punished because I made her listen to all 25 minutes of Arlo Guthrie singing *Alice’s Restaurant*, the draft dodger’s anthem....

How does one judge a mother? Certainly, there is no point to asking, “Why?”, because we all do. I figured my Mama was generally a good person because little kids clove to her, and, as she would have remarked, *small children cain’t abide evil*. As a young adult, I was confounded to hear Mama talking to four year olds like peers, or taking (wise) counsel for herself from her six year old grandson, Michael. (Then, of course, she sang

“Michael Row the Boat Ashore” to him.) I took it as a good sign that Mama favored Glen, the most recalcitrant of her grandchildren, typically declaring in the face of his misbehavior, “*Why, that chile don’t mean nothin’ by that!*”

I won’t claim that my mother didn’t have an angry, spiteful side that crested considerably over the years. In fact, I feel that my younger brothers and sisters got a little cheated when it came to the more nurturing part of Mama. I got her in Kentucky, before she faded in New Jersey. Until I brought her to judgment, the mother I envisioned in my head was typically singing and clapping and reciting wonderful old stories and poems in the mountain tradition. She reminisced about her own granny *wailin’ and shakin’ and shoutin’ “hallelujah!” at Sundie-come-to-meetin’s.*

Through repetitive osmosis, if nothing else, I learned from Mama the words to numerous hymns and mountain songs: *The Old Rugged Cross; I Saw The Light; Bringing in the Sheaves, Will the Circle Be Unbroken.* Folks who have the mountain in their soul can’t help but bob their heads and stomp those feet when someone strums a banjo, strikes a hammered dulcimer or plucks away at an autoharp. Mama had songs to express moral indignation, to warn about the wages of sin, to bemoan the constant sorrow, and to call for redemption. But mostly, she had songs for rejoicing, and giving thanks, and expressing joy and comfort. When she was hospitalized shortly before her death, the night staff giggled about Mom’s perpetual trilling of “Country Western songs.” The songs were really Appalachian Mountain ones though, and, as she lay dying, Mama informed me that *singin’ like that is my way-a prayin.*

I now understand that my mother invoked in me a deeply spiritual legacy that was eventually, irrevocably, diminished by my affiliation with organized religion *up north*. To her lasting sorrow, most of Mama's children had renounced, or at least quietly withdrawn, from any formal religious practice by young adulthood. Still, because of my mother, to this day I know my Bible stories and can recite many verses of scripture. My mother may have felt powerless and humbled in the world at large, but she was determined to save her *younguns from actin' like heathens*. And she succeeded. All seven of us grown *chillern* have somehow been *teched by the spirit*, and in one way or another *tend and serve* through our communities or chosen professions. As my youngest brother David, a doctor, once put it, "Because of Mom, *surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.*"

My daughter loves music and is a wonderful singer. People think that she inherited her talent from my husband, a trained musician. It's likely she got her excellent "ear" and her affinity for performing from him, but I believe that some special portion of her musical sensibility comes from her Appalachian heritage: that's her granny and I poking our heads through. May the circle be unbroken.

"May the Circle Be Unbroken" in [Eureka Literary Magazine](#), Vol. 13, No. 1(Fall 2004).