RESTORYING A LIFE

I Can See Clearly Now

Gretchen Staebler

My north star as I became an adult was conflicted. I grew up in the fifties and sixties with my mother's gender-typical role model, along with those I saw in *Father Knows Best*, *Donna Reed* and *Leave It to Beaver*. But as I came of age I also witnessed Marlo Thomas's "working girl" Ann Marie in *That Girl*, along with Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem and bra burning.

I went to college – an expectation of me and my two sisters – but I had been left on my own to uncover passion and develop gifts, and I hadn't done it. With no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up, I chose a major by process of elimination. Post-graduation, I got married and became a full-time wife and mother, if not choosing my mother's path, falling into it.

Everything changed when, at forty, my marriage ended. I went to graduate school, but, degree in hand, I still didn't know how to be a career woman. I floundered as I looked

for my niche. I wish I could say I began watching my mother more closely, but the looking glass I kept her in remained clouded by my obstinate refusal to see her beyond my childhood years, or across the 2500 miles that physically separated us in my adulthood.

In my growing up years, my mother had been the action behind the face, hiding behind her introversion and in her understanding of women's and men's roles. She was the elected PTA president and did the work, but my father led the meetings. She did the work at our church, but declined to be on a leadership board. She was a Girl Scout leader and Sunday school teacher, mingling with children where she felt more confident and competent.

When my father retired from his illustrious career, she seemingly decided it was her time. She threw herself into activism, changing the persona of the person I thought I knew. She jumped into peace initiatives and gun control, speaking passion- ately to church and civic groups. She led a charge to save the second-growth forest adjacent to our home, defying her "trees are a natural resource" husband before bringing him along with her. Slowly I began to see her in a new light as she discovered creative ways to express her long-buried (or undiscovered) passions and overcome her fears.

After the end of my marriage, as I struggled to put together a life and a living, I took my first writing class and started a blog about restoring the garden at the house I had bought on my own. I honed in on my love of writing. I found a job I could shine in. I re-storied my life. I was thriving. I was busy when my father died, and still not watching my mother courageously continue living on her own. (Later she would say her eighties were her favourite decade. She was seventy-nine when she became a widow.)

And then, at the apex of my own newly discovered confidence and creative living, I moved.

Leaving the garden I had created and returning to my childhood home – and my mother's garden – on the other side of the country was an act of courage. My mother's grit as she re-storied her own life after my father died had begun to seep into my consciousness. At ninety-six, though, she was in need of a companion traveler – not that she would admit it. It was a move I had longed for since leaving the Pacific Northwest nearly four decades earlier, but I hadn't envisioned it like this.

Watching her up close for the next six years was an education I could not have received in a classroom. As I read the letters she and my father wrote to one another from opposite sides of the ocean during World War II, her intrepidness and creativity in putting together an unexpected life as a young woman moved her out from behind my

mirror. All these years I had been seeing only my own image in the glass, and yet she was there all along. Through the years we had together until her death, we battled to hold onto the independence we had each come to in the fullness of maturity, unwilling to cede it to the other. They were hard years.

Writing down the story in a new blog was my life-saving outlet. It was where I intersected with the world beyond a stifling existence. As in the garden blog, it was a sharing of my hands-in-the-dirt education with readers.

Following my mother's death, I finished transforming my blog posts and journal into a memoir. It was published as autumn morphed towards winter in 2022. Now, for the first time, I am engaging in volunteerism and social activism as I support family caregivers and educate others about the unsung world of family caregiving. Readers of my memoir are finding the courage to take control of their own self-care, even as they care for another. They are giving themselves permission not to do "all the things" alone, to ask for help. They are talking more openly about the struggle that is family caregiving. Perhaps they are writing down their own stories.

In celebration of my 70th birthday in 2022, I turned my passion for hiking – and my newest blog about my outdoor adventures – into a volunteer position at Mt. Rainier National Park, helping others discover and protect the beauty of the natural world. And who modelled that re-storying for me? My mother. She has become my clear and shining north star.

When I returned to my mother's garden at age sixty, I thought maybe in whatever time we were to have together, I could find the mother I had always wished for: one who would cheer me on with praise, admiration, celebration – pompoms even. Instead, she just kept being who she always had been: the unflinching woman I hadn't seen clearly any more than I felt seen by her. I began shaking those pompoms for myself, cheering myself on, just as she had quietly championed herself. I look in the mirror now and I see her smiling back. Maybe even a hint of pompom cheering me on.

My mother thought I had returned to my childhood home so she could take care of me, rather than vice versa. And maybe she did. Even now, five years after her death, as I continue living in the home she created, I am still learning from her.

The author and her mother at Mt. Rainier, c. 1959
The author and her mother at the Million Mom March in Washington, D.C., 2000
The author and her mother at home, 2014

Award-winning author **Gretchen Staebler** is a daughter, sister, mother, grandmother and wandering adventurer who, at age sixty, left decades of grown-up life on the East Coast to return to the mountains, beaches, and rain of her soul's home in the American Pacific Northwest. She blogs about her adventures from coffee shops, her father's desk, national park lodges, her tent – wherever she feels cozy. She lives with her cat Lena in her childhood home in a small town in Washington State. Gretchen can be found adventuring at www.WritingDownTheStory.com

For information and stories about her memoir and resources for family caregivers, she hopes you will visit www.gretchenstaebler.com.