

Who but a mother? Her lessons last a lifetime

by John R. Erickson

I've enjoyed some success as a writer, but it wasn't always that way. Between 1967 and 1982, I wrote four hours every day and sent off manuscripts and query letters to every publisher I could think of.

After writing in the early morning hours, I went out to make a living for my family, working as a farm hand, bartender, handyman, and ranch cowboy. Upon returning home every evening, I went straight to the mail to see if any of my stories had been accepted for publication.

The mail brought an unending river of rejection slips. This went on for 15 years.

Sometimes I look back on those difficult times and wonder why I didn't do the sensible thing and quit. Why would a guy in a little Texas town believe that he was supposed to be a writer, when the best minds in the publishing business were pretty sure that he ought to be doing something else?

The answer is that I had a wife who believed in what I was doing and a mother who had instilled in me a powerful sense of mission. Anna Beth, my mother, was a rancher's daughter from West Texas, descended from pioneering folk who were literate but not "educated." Instead of sending me to kindergarten, she kept me at home and gave me a precious gift: herself, her time, her wisdom.

She was an excellent storyteller and passed her love of language on to me. Some of her stories involved the ranchers, cowboys, and sturdy women in our family. Other stories came from the Bible: Samson, David, Joseph, Samuel, and especially Moses. At the age of 5, I wanted to be Moses.

She told me, "God has given you a special talent. You must protect it and use it wisely." Maybe that's something every mother tells her children, but I took it to heart. I believed her, and years later as a struggling writer, I still believed her.

Who but a mother could do that? No one. No preacher or college professor, no president of the United States, no billionaire or movie star. Only a mother has the power to shape the future with two short sentences.

I remember my mother telling me something she had heard from her mother: "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world."

I would guess that most American children have never heard that. Where would they hear it today? Not in public schools and certainly not on television. The last time I checked, women on television seemed in no mood to rock cradles. They were too busy rocking mattresses and throwing karate chops.

It appears that Mother's aphorism no longer exists in the English language and whatever wisdom it contained has vanished. Yet the news out of Europe suggests that it might be coming back in a different form.

This year the German government has begun paying women \$12,000 to have a baby. Actuaries have figured out that if someone doesn't start having babies, in 20 years there will be no young workers paying into the pension system.

Other countries are watching with interest, since their populations are also declining. It seems that everyone in Western Europe is having such a good time, nobody wants to stay home and raise kids.

Until fairly recent times, Christian people regarded motherhood as a sacred vocation, designed by our Creator, but at some point in my lifetime, it acquired its present definition as menial labor. Mothers traditionally fed the little creatures, rocked them at night and sang lullabies, cooked, changed diapers and cleaned up messes — that was priceless.

And how about teaching? Mothers did that in the old days: manners, self-discipline, patriotism, even morality and religious faith. I got all that from my mother.

I never got around to thanking her. She died suddenly in 1977 and didn't get to see her earthy sense of humor reflected in the Hank the Cowdog books. Today, when I see the sparkling eyes of children who are reading those stories, I think of her.

Thank you, Mother.

