

Courtesy of mom: Moment of humbling grace

By Erik Zygmunt

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“Even bad men love their mommas.”

In the 2007 remake of the Western film “3:10 to Yuma,” the outlaw Ben Wade, portrayed by Russell Crowe, utters those words before hurling from a cliff the bounty hunter who has just insulted his mother.

The scene hints that Crowe’s mostly despicable character is not beyond redemption. “At least he loves his momma,” we think, internalizing the fact that even this murderer has a capacity for love.

In fact, every one of us has it. Many of us owe our mothers a debt of gratitude for being the agents of this God-given gift.

My soul carries the richness of the tender love my mom showered upon me in my first moments, days and years, but my brain harbors only the haziest of recollections. I can’t remember the set to my mom’s mouth or the glad weariness in her eyes as she carried out the endless tasks delegated to mothers, though I glimpse these lost images whenever mother and baby cross my path.

Even the moments closer to the present are taking on a sepia hue.

A little over a decade ago, I was a couple of years out of college, living with my parents and drifting. I was sitting on the front porch of our New Hampshire home, surveying the yard, when a large-boned young woman labored up the driveway on an unfashionable 10-speed bicycle. It was a summer day; I had probably just returned from one of a parade of short-term construction jobs.

The caller wiped the sweat from her brow and inquired, a bit out of breath, if I was “the man of the house.” My dad was out somewhere, so I replied – oblivious to irony – that the man of the house was not present.

The woman – black and probably not from our neighborhood – was clutching a clipboard and overstuffed folder that she had pulled from her bag. I knew that a master of his domain will always decline a cold sales pitch without remorse, but I was having a hard time faking it. I gave her a sheepish shrug as she turned to leave, throwing her leg over the too-high bicycle seat.

My mom stepped out from behind the house then, sweating some herself from pulling weeds in the afternoon sun.

“Hi,” she said gently.

As they regarded each other I slunk off to the backyard to crank off a set of chin-ups

or other pointless exercise.

A few minutes later I strolled into the house with pumped-up arms, having happily forgotten the incident. I neared the dining room and froze in my tracks. I might as well have been looking at a painting at the Louvre.

My mom and her guest were at the table, across from each other. My mom, sitting up straight, pushed a hefty ice-filled glass of lemonade toward the girl, who was hunched over, resting on her elbows and forearms.

With closed eyes, she downed the cold drink in great gulps.

My mom refilled her glass and selected a few magazine subscriptions to purchase from her materials.

Erik Zygmunt is a staff writer for the Catholic Review.

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