

Lessons in frugality

In 1963 my mom was a second grader at St. Joe's in West St. Paul, Minn., when Sister Marie Pauline asked her to stay after school. The petite, habited teacher held a lined sheet of paper bearing the mandated header JMJ in No. 2 pencil. It was Mom's penmanship exercise. Then she turned the sheet over and pointed to the bottom third, which was blank.

"I think you should pray about not being wasteful," Sister Marie Pauline said.

So began Mom's education in waste-not-want-not theology, a Great Depression mentality stitched together by the Baltimore Catechism in an era of big families and small houses and cloaked nuns living out a vow of poverty with bare faces and flat shoes.

My mom never forgot the after-school reprimand. She went on to use cloth diapers on her babies, training us to get four blows out of one tissue and to ration squares of toilet paper. She reuses tea bags and breaks sticks of gum in half. She mines free bins at garage sales and combs drive-thrus for stray nickels. She is the queen of Walgreen's rebates.

Somewhere along the way Mom's cost cutting started to look like pleasure cutting, threatening to discount her own worth: a first-rate mother consigned to the second hand.

Throughout the course of my 20s, the gap between her lifestyle and mine has widened. I've kneeled at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; she's been to the Corn Palace in Mitchell, S.D. Mom didn't wear a lick of make-up on her wedding day; I hired a make-up artist to be a glamorous bride. The difference isn't an increment, but a leap. Is she depriving herself? Am I spoiled?

So this morning I took Mom to receive, at age 56, her first pedicure. Her freckled, size-8 feet have looked tired, her pinky toes, deeply creased.

Mom selected a copper polish - OPI's "It's my Prague-ative" - and I opted for a neon orange. "Do you have a coupon?" she whispered.

We slid onto our chairs, and the buffing began. “This is probably good for my circulation,” Mom said.

A slim brunette arrived and was seated on my other side. She was stunned by Mom’s late-in-life first: At 60, she said, she’d had hundreds of pedicures.

Once we moved to the nail dryers, Mom cited the Scripture that has fueled her frugality: St. Paul’s exhortation to the Philippians to be content “in every circumstance” - wherever you are, whatever you have. To Mom, that meant being satisfied with the status quo: modest rambler, old furniture, artificial Christmas tree.

But at some point in her 50s she could see she may have taken it too far, becoming “austere,” even. It was time for more fun, she said, to rejoice in a broader swath of God’s creation. I’ve seen Mom pursue this: taking dance lessons, teaching herself harmonica and rock climbing in Alaska.

Our nails were dry by then, and I examined her smooth, soft feet. The toes of a teen on a middle-aged body!

Back home I Googled Philippians 4. Tinkering with my scrimp-splurge ratio feels like one of the more significant calculations of adulthood. I treat myself to a facial on every birthday, yet much of my wardrobe was gently used.

Turns out the sentence right before the “every circumstance” line tempers it all: “I know indeed how to live in humble circumstances; I know also how to live with abundance.” A permission slip from St. Paul for an occasional pedicure.

Mom’s email came at 9:06 pm: “I’d do it again!”