

God's Perfect Child

by Patti Linsky

"Give him a banana."

Oh, God, here we go again.

I was driving the forty five minutes from North Miami Beach to Boynton Beach so my parents could meet our son, then one, who sat quietly in his car seat for forty of those forty five minutes completely content, and then he totally lost it. Maybe he was picking up on the visit which was about to ensue.

In those four words suggested by my mother, Blanche, (may she rest in peace), I understood why I, shall we say, never learned to deal with my feelings.

Fix it with food, fix it with anything that would cover up the never-ending emptiness within my being. Fritos with onion dip, chocolate anything, and let's not forget the Three V's ~ Vicodin, Vodka and Valium.

In those four words, it became crystal clear how her inability to deal with life, which was not an easy life, was transposed into me. And oh, how I blamed her for my inability to cope. For years and years it was her fault, right up until her death in 2003, actually, when I realized that she was passing down what she knew, nothing more, nothing less. And that I had to forgive her, as well as my grandmother Sadie, for what they could not teach.

What my Mom did imbue within me was her love of music and her God-given talents. Beautiful singer, woman, spirit. She even received a full scholarship to La Scala Opera House, but her parents didn't allow her to go. Imagine, at seventeen years of age, the devastation she must have felt...as if she wasn't good enough, wasn't chosen by her own parents to fly and soar and achieve her greatness as was destined. Instead, she put all of her unfulfilled dreams and hopes and aspirations into me.

You see, I sing. I am blessed with an ability to hold pitch, interpret, touch and inspire. All of the things she wasn't allowed to do. I inherited my talents from her side of the family. Heifetz was Blanche's maiden name (think Jascha the violinist). She lived vicariously through me, took credit for my talents, basically made me crazy.

I was "God's Perfect Child". The part that Blanche left out was "with your imperfections". For if I had been imperfectly perfect and allowed to embrace my vulnerabilities instead of putting on the good front for appearances' sake, my life would have been completely different. Mom was the one with the grand idea to move from South Miami to West Palm Beach, Florida because the return address would look good on the envelope. There was tremendous pressure, (and in hind sight), self inflicted pressure, to be the perfect girl, woman, professional. I had the need to please from a very early age. For as long as I can remember, I was striving for acceptance, to be noticed and loved and liked. I saw my face in the faces of

others. Reacting to how you talked to me, morphing into whatever you needed me to be, completely devoid of my own voice. Ironic, isn't it? A singer who cannot find her own vocal expression with which to respond and set boundaries and be fine with herself.

Perhaps it was because when I was younger, I was abused by my father. Not forever, but long enough to lose trust in myself and to look for Daddy in all the wrong places. My self esteem was dependent upon any and every thing except the truth. It has taken years to forgive myself and my father for the part played in this sad, albeit real chapter of my life.

It's so interesting looking back upon that time and how it played such a huge part in my development, or lack thereof. I am amazed that I am even alive to write this. I have had my share of close calls with death. Certainly I have experienced many emotional deaths ~ loss of self, loss of parents who weren't emotionally available, loss of integrity, dignity and humility. Loss of being comfortable with who I was, feelings and knowledge of not being enough, acting out in a myriad of ways to find the balance within.

The truth is, there was no balance. I thought I would find my equilibrium as a wife, so I did what any nice Jewish girl would do....I married a rabbi, getting married right out of college to a man of stature in the community who gave me everything thought I needed to be complete. I had a place of honor in the community, a new home on the West Coast (which was just far enough away from my mother), and became a Stepford wife in the truest sense. Appropriate, great cook, devoted wife, and cocaine addict. My marriage lasted two years and nine months. The reason it fell apart was because of a moment of consciousness with which I was graced, one morning, after the High Holy Days. We had decided to start a family. You know how sometimes you get these flashes of scenes within your mind, each lasting about a second? Well, mine went something like this:

We're going to try to get pregnant.

I'm not sure that I want this...

But he does, so we should.

I don't think I'm going to be with him forever...

So I'll be a single parent ~ my mom did it, and it wan't so bad.

(Tires Screeching) WAIT A MINUTE...being a single mom was really difficult...how can I knowingly do this when deep down I am sure I won't be married to him for the long haul?

Then the discussion ensued.

Him: When do you think you might be ready to have a child?

Me: I don't know if I ever will be.

By the end of the week I was out of the house.

That was the beginning of the end of the beginning.

With the liberation of again being single, there was only this gnawing feeling within my heart and soul of incredible loneliness. For so many years I didn't know who I was. By the time I was in my late 20's, yes, I had established myself as a cantor in a wonderful temple, leading the congregation in prayer, with warmth and enthusiasm which I truly believed to be authentic. I got remarried to a wonderful man. People would say to me, "I don't know how you do it all". Loving wife, mother of two beautiful children, working full time, singing all over the country, maintaining the illusion of Ms. Have It All Together. If they only knew.

If they only knew how desperately I was on the hamster wheel of wanting to be liked/loved/accepted/acknowledged.

The self-imposed prison of perfection was interminable. I felt like a pressure cooker ready to explode. It was at this time that God interceded and gave me the first of a series of what I now know to be gifts, namely of being in a car accident in 1996. "Slow down", God was saying. And I did. It stopped me in my tracks, giving me whiplash and a great excuse to begin down the long and winding road of the dance with painkillers. They became my favorite food group, my best friend, my answer to not feeling anything at all, in the guise of being a functioning drug addict.

At first, it was a legitimate, prescribed cocktail to alleviate the excruciating pain I was in due to the accident. Over time, though, the medicine (taken as directed), became the drugs (which are not prescribed). It was a fine line, and I knew just how to finesse it to more or less function in my world. Vicodin, valium and a plethora of other pills became a staple in my life. It was also at this time, over a two year period, that I experienced the deaths of four of the people closest to me. My best friend Rikki died of cancer. Soon after that, my stepfather passed away. Within the next year, I lost my Mom and my stepmother Ann, and it all became too much. The grief, anger, abandonment and profound sadness was too much to bear. By now, the pills became a lifeline to cope with the emptiness I felt.

One would think, I suppose, that it would be a temporary condition...to just take the edge off until things got better and life got more manageable. That never happened. I became a liar and led a double life, which of course, was coupled with tremendous shame. How could I, in good conscience, be a role model to my community, all the while living in the fog of addiction, and ultimately, descending into the disease of alcoholism?

Yes, I am an alcoholic. I cannot have one drink. It will lead to my physical death, and of this I am sure. It becomes a vicious cycle. The unmanageability of life, the shame of failure, the trying to get it right, only to find that the answers don't come. With each failure comes the desire to numb that reinforcement of feeling as if I am never enough. Losing sight of what needs to happen, rather than being more than

alright with any progress at all... the futility was constant and too much to bear. Fortunately, even with coming close to death more than once, it wasn't my time yet but I sure knew how to tempt fate.

And speaking of death of the physical nature, one day we had a garage sale. I was organized, ready and willing to give it my all. The kids and our nanny and some friends helped with the meticulous set up, and I took my "medicine" so I would have energy and calm and sell everything. I was all that, yes I was. In complete control.

Until I went back into the house for a minute, and forgot that I had taken the meds. I proceeded to take a second helping, and instead of drinking apple juice to swallow the pills, I took a large swig of chardonnay instead.

God's intervention #2.

I never returned to the garage sale. Our nanny found me slumped over the computer table unresponsive. She tried to walk me around but I was so out of it...who wouldn't be during an overdose? Now picture this, if you will. Two children, 8 and 12 at the time, watching the chaos and panic and not knowing how or if their worlds would ever be the same. My son was asked to call 911 as my daughter held tight to our nanny, and the paramedics wheeled me away to the ambulance. The paramedic, of course had to ask the question that haunts me to this day. "Ma'am, is this what you want? Do you want your children to be taken away from you because of what you did? I hated him for that. And I hated myself more. My last memory was of my children, their innocence in that moment being stripped away, staring out the window watching me go and saying to me, "Mommy, please don't die".

Mommy. Please. Don't. Die.

I have permanently reserved those words and that moment as a snapshot in my mind, heart and soul as my alcoholic and drug addicted bottom.

To this day, tears come to my eyes just thinking about it, what I did to my family, how selfish and entrenched with my disease I was, the disease which comes between the love of a mother and her children, a husband and a wife.

Thankfully, I went into recovery and remained sober. But there was still a gaping hole within me, one which I could not fill.

It was on the way to a bar mitzvah that I began crying and could not stop. Could not stop. I called my rabbi from the car and told him that I thought I was losing my mind, and that I needed to talk to him when I got to temple. Thank God he is who he is...compassionate and understanding, and willing to give me space and support as I was beginning to go down the road of a nervous breakdown.

Three days later I put myself in rehab. I turned 50 on Mother's Day in rehab. It was the best birthday of my life. You may be shaking your head at this point wondering how in the world someone might say that...but truly, it was. I was grateful that my husband and two children came to visit me, as difficult as it must have been for them. My heart was filled beyond words at this strange dichotomy...even with the surrealism of it all. But deep down I knew that I was in the right place to heal the wounds and incompleteness that had permeated my soul for a lifetime.

And of course, there were two cakes...one for the birthday and one for Mother's Day, so that helped a little. It was not devoid of pain or shame. However, I am eternally grateful for the courage it took for them to make the trip to tell me that they loved me. I was actually beginning to even love myself again.

For 31 days I journaled and cried and detoxed and meditated and talked about the crux of my issues of feeling as though I'm not enough. Slowly, I began to piece together the dysfunctional pieces of the puzzle that was my life. I started seeing how much drama I infused into every fiber of my being, trying to be more than ok, wishing I was who everyone thought I was.

In rehab I came to terms for the very first time with my father's abuse. Things started to make sense. I realized that my inability to speak up for what I needed and wanted, unapologetically, stemmed from my shame. It wasn't until a couple of years later that I truly came to terms with the preciousness of life and voicing my needs.

Cue God Intervention #3.

It was the summer of 2009 and I was experiencing abdominal pain and flu-like symptoms. I decided to see my doctor, who ordered a CT scan, which found a stone in my bile duct. We decided to take care of this with a minimally invasive endoscopy after the High Holidays. I sang my heart out, asking God to break me open so that I could inspire our congregation to feel the Divine within each of them. Words of praise and thankfulness for my gift were overflowing. My ego soared. I had succeeded. I was loved and praised and made a difference in the lives of so many.

What a perfect time to get the procedure.

What was supposed to be a two hour outpatient experience led to a three week stay in the hospital. During the endoscopy my pancreas was nicked, sending me into sepsis and pancreatitis. Two days later I had an open surgery to save my life. Awakening in ICU with twenty-six staples in my stomach, I knew that something went horribly wrong. And yet, I knew nothing. I was in shock, terrified, higher than a kite on morphine, and completely at a loss for words.

And my belief in God had vanished.

You see, in life, I had always had a close relationship with God or whatever you may wish to call something larger than yourself. Because I came so very close to meeting God in death, I couldn't find God's presence and bigger plan in this mystery which was unfolding with my body. To even entertain the notion that God was with me the entire time, guiding and sustaining me until I arrived at my next chapter's destination was unthinkable. I wasn't able to understand this until several years after the operation and hospital stay which would forever change and effect my life and its path.

My recovery from surgery was close to four months. When I tried to go back to work, I simply couldn't muster up the energy and strength required for the position. It would have meant sacrificing my family for my temple community, and due to my disease, I had done that for too long. It was time to retire, and trust in the things that I could not see.

I had been a cantor for thirty years. It was in many ways my identity, or so I thought. What I could not fathom was what I would do for the next chapter of my life. It made me crazy to be dependent upon anyone. After all, I was God's Perfect Child and could and would not ever want to be in the position for asking for help. From anyone.

The vulnerability and fear which ensued were like nothing I had ever experienced. The pills beckoned on a daily basis for a very long time ~ anything to aid in not feeling. But I knew there had to be a greater purpose in the operation gone horribly wrong.

By the grace of God I found the answer. It was in the form of a four month women's empowerment workshop. We met one Sunday a month, for five hours. Ten women who were searching for their passion, their direction and their purpose. We were taught by two gifted women who became extraordinary life coaches, Michelle Bauman, JD, MA and Carolyn Freyer-Jones, MA who had embarked upon their own journeys. We listened to one another, gave feedback when asked, did bucket lists. It was there that I found the courage to tell my story in the format of a one woman show, entitled Altar EGO. It is brutally honest and funny and human and I am so proud of it. In some ways God knew that this was supposed to be a part of the journey I am on. I sing and tell stories about the things we do to fill us up . . . make us feel supposedly whole, be it with relationships or food, people, religion, addictions, little games on our phones, whatever we need to do to survive . But truly, the play is about the journey back to self, and feeling that I am, and we are, enough. It's something I believe I was meant to share to inspire others to find their own second chances and forgiveness.

We all have something. We are imperfectly perfect. I had to accept that, and that I am here for a reason. The addictions and pain and depression I have experienced are what have made me the woman I am today. If I can help just one person know that they are not alone in their struggle, that second chances are possible and mistakes are just illusions, then the journey has been more than worth it.