

THINGS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME

THINGS
CLAIRE
HALLIDAY My
MOTHER
TAUGHT
ME



echo



echo

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For Audrey, Sean, Edie & Abbie – look back with love

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INTRODUCTION

History is a personal thing. I am fascinated by the perceptions people have of their own lives and circumstances.

I'm also fascinated by motherhood and the relationships between mothers and their children.

I have four children of my own, and before that, I started life as the baby of a young mother who felt she didn't have the capacity, resources, or desire to look after me herself. That led me to the home of a woman who had lost one of her own babies in pregnancy and wanted another child so badly that she was prepared to take someone else's.

THINGS MY MOTHER TAUGHT ME...

When I catch myself nagging my children about how much sunscreen they should be wearing, or how they shouldn't climb any higher on the monkey bars, or how I don't want them to go to that party at the house of a child whose parents I've never met, or when I send them away to fend for themselves in front of the television for a couple of hours while I check emails and try to find that balance between work and home, I wonder how they will eventually judge me and the job I have done as their mum.

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Should I have shown them my tears those times I was sad? Do I tell them all the bad things that happened to me in the hope they won't make the same mistakes? Or should I do my best to show them I am breezing through life and that the world really is a wonderful place?

I have clear memories of so many moments from childhood – some good and some not so happy. There were the times we spent in a caravan together, with Mum's ham sandwiches on white bread for lunch on a flat South Australian beach, and there was the way she used to turn up the car radio and dance to Rod Stewart on the sand. Then the screaming matches between us when my idea of teenage freedom didn't match her visions for my safety. But I know there are so many other things I've forgotten. I'm sure they are all important – all memories shape us, in their own ways.

My lessons to my own children began with all the basic cautionary tales of health and safety – red means danger, wash your hands after going to the toilet, if your hair is long you should tie it back when you're standing near the stove, don't touch any spiders (just in case) and don't ever get into the car of a stranger who tells you they have a cute puppy or kitten or a bag of lollies. But life gets more complicated for our children as they grow and the lessons we need to share are forced to evolve.

SOME THINGS, THOUGH, WILL ALWAYS BE THE SAME.

When I spoke to my interviewees about the things they learned from their mothers, I was reminded that small moments do matter.

As a mother, that's both comforting and terrifying. Those times you drove them to rowing training when all you wanted to do was sleep in might actually be appreciated. That snipey little insult you deliver when you're having a bad day may be the one thing that they tell their counsellor when they're forty.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM YOUR MOTHER?

For dancer Li Cunxin, they were lessons of pure sacrifice, from a mother who managed to raise a herd of children in rural China even though there wasn't always enough food to feed herself.

Ask Benjamin Law and he'll tell you that he learned about acceptance and understanding, which helped to drive his ambitions as a writer and gave him confidence to come out as a gay man.

For author Kathy Lette, the lessons were about steady support and unconditional love, and these gave her the resilience and strength she needed to care for her autistic son.

Tracy Bartram knows it was the inheritance of her mother's absurd sense of humour – even in the craziest of circumstances – that helped her become the person she is today.

A MOTHER'S INFLUENCE AND EDUCATION CAN BE POWERFUL.

In my own life, I have watched my mother overcome all kinds of challenges and upheavals. I now have even more to learn as she enters the next stage of life, bothered by the beginnings of

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dementia and trying to clear the hurdle of loneliness that has come with outliving her friends.

There is a lot to be gained from watching and listening to the lives that have gone before us. People may not be perfect. But even the flaws and failings have something to teach us and the happy times might have even more.

These stories aren't all dramatic. Life isn't really like that for everyone. But there is something we do all share. We all have a mother. Things my mother taught me? There are plenty. Part of growing up is recognising what those lessons were.

LI CUNXIN



Before Li Cunxin travelled the world as a leading ballet dancer and became Artistic Director of the Queensland Ballet, he spent his childhood in poverty-stricken rural China. His mother had a vision about his success, and her sacrifice for her son – to be separated from him for years when he was chosen to attend the prestigious Beijing Dance Academy – was the force that changed his life, and the fortunes of his entire family. Li's book, *Mao's Last Dancer*, was an international bestseller.

When I was younger, when I thought of my mother – or even imagined the smell of her cooking – I remembered that when she cooked, she sang. Just little tunes she made up while she worked.

She may have had a special treat of meat or fresh oil and she would be so happy because she knew we were going to have a lovely meal that everybody was going to enjoy. Now, I really enjoy cooking for my children. All my brothers have learned

Pictured: Li Cunxin with his parents Fang Reiqing and Li Tingfang

how to make my mother's dumplings. They are legendary. I don't think I can find a dumpling house in Queensland that would be comparable to my mother's.

My mother loved the arts – she was especially crazy about music. If there was any sort of performance in our village, my mother would be the first one to make us go and find a little spot – ‘Just put the stool there so nobody can take it away,’ she would say. We would sometimes sleep in the square. It didn't matter if it was cold or hot, we would sleep overnight there to occupy our little spot.

Mum loved to see me dance. She just loved it. Years later, she told me the story about a strange dream she had two or three weeks before I was chosen to go to the Beijing Dance Academy. One morning she woke up and told my father: ‘I think our son will be selected to go to Beijing Dance Academy.’ In her dream, she was in a big crowd. Because she was quite little she couldn't see anything as she tried to make her way through, so she tapped on a man's back and said: ‘Hey, hey, can you tell me what is going on?’ The man told her that there were some dancing goddesses. He then bent down and put my mother on his shoulders and she saw through a crack, almost in the clouds, these beautiful goddesses. They were sort of dancing and then, very quickly, just disappeared. Mum said it was beautiful – she said it was in rainbow colours and these beautiful people were wearing these chiffon costumes.

A few weeks later, a government official came to my village and said to my family: ‘Your son is one of the forty-four chosen to go to Beijing to study ballet.’ It was quite incredible for a peasant girl – for a peasant mother – to have such artistic dreams.

My mother was always a dreamer. I am a dreamer too. She was the one who had the sensitivity to understand our dreams. She certainly understood my dreams when I was selected to leave home at eleven years old to study at the Academy. From my village, it was a long way away – twenty-four hours on a train – and my father expressed reservations because he felt I was too young. We didn't know a single soul in Beijing and he felt that nobody could care for me, but my mother convinced him to let me go. She knew that I was a dreamer. I had big dreams as a child – more so than any of my six brothers. She said to my father: 'This is the one chance for your son, and we can't take that chance away from him.' She knew she was right. It was a chance to get ahead, do something different – do *something* – or at least not be starving back home. I did not really understand the artistic world at all, but, even then, I knew it might give me some opportunity – even if I didn't know exactly what that was.

As a mother, you know, it would have been very hard for her to let her child go, and yet she was the one who saw the big picture. I find that incredible. I have always known it was incredible but now, as a parent, there is a deeper understanding. Even when my wife and I sent our first child away for school camp – knowing that she would be well cared for and that good food would be provided – we were unsettled and worried about her being away from us. My wife and I have seen the world; we have a global perspective and we left our own homes so early on. Even so, when the time came it was hard to send our children to America on scholarships to study. It nearly killed us – and we have phones and internet and so many ways to communicate whenever we want.

When I went to Bejiing, there was no phone my mother could call me on and my family was too poor to catch the train. Even letters were too expensive to send – the price of one stamp meant several days of my family’s survival. I don’t know how many tears my mother shed quietly, but in front of me – once a year when she did see me – she always had a very brave face. She didn’t want to take my courage away. I also think that, even though being without her son would have been very difficult, she must have slept a little bit better knowing that I, at least, had food in my belly.

Seven years is a long time to be away. Those times I did see her? Oh, they were heaven. I missed her dreadfully, especially those first three years when I was younger. People talk about homesickness as a real sickness and I can definitely agree; you have no energy, and all your thoughts are of your family – being sick is exactly what it was like. I missed my mother dreadfully. I missed her voice. I missed her smell and the smell of her cooking. It would have been different for my family. They stayed in that familiar place and only one thing was missing – me. For me, everything around me was new so it felt like a complete loss. My mother had been my strength for so long. It was her love that I longed for. Despite the tough lifestyle we’d had in that little village – all those worries about getting sick and never recovering, or starving because we had no food – my mother’s laughter always made me feel that everything would be okay.

I grew up in a village of more than three hundred families and my brothers and I were all aware that we were very poor. It was tough. My mother’s sense of humour nourished us: we needed it – we needed laughter just like we needed food. We

would often go to sleep hungry, but with her personality and good humour, she would be able to put our situation into a context that cheered us up. She'd say sensible things like: 'Well look, aren't we lucky to be able to have at least a little something to eat? You know, others out there could be starving to death tonight.' And that was the truth, sadly. There were many people in our village who died of starvation during that time.

It was in those moments that I could see how strong she really was and how mindful she was in focusing on us and keeping us safe and happy. I mean, sometimes you only needed to look at her expression to know she was desperate, because she knew her children were going to have a tough night and not have enough food to eat, but then, somehow, she would cheer us up and make us look at the brighter side of life. It was a wonderful gift she gave to us. She took away our fears, and she never showed us her own.

It wasn't just us who got so much comfort from her strength. When people had problems – when they had a row or some family issues – my mother was always the one people would come to. She was the one people respected and she had this ability to find the right perspective on life. It was a special thing.

It's only now, as an adult, that I can truly reflect on those times and understand the power of her strength of character, of her generosity, of what a positive person she was. There were desperate moments – times when she was just absolutely on the verge of breaking down because we were so poor – and somehow she held it together and, in turn, held the family together. If she had crumbled, my whole family would have disintegrated.

My father was always similar in terms of that strength – that

steely inner strength – but he doesn't speak very much. He is a man of very few words. It's always been that way. Mum was the one who was very verbal and, you know, probably because of her incredible, big personality, it created the right balance between my father and my mother. The few times when my father did speak, everybody would just be quiet – it was very effective. My father worked relentlessly and made sure that he provided for the family, but my mother was the glue.

I think I've definitely inherited a large part of my mother's personality, rather than my father's. If I didn't have that part of her, I probably would not be able to get on the stage to perform and to express myself well.

I did ask my mother, later, what her own dreams were. She told me that really, her dream was for us. She dreamed of survival for all her children and for their wellbeing, and for them to become responsible, good adults. That was her dream. It's not unusual. A traditional Chinese ideal, particularly in her era, is simply to marry well. My mother had hopes of marrying a man who would love her and care for her and, in return, she would love him and provide a family for him. My mother bore seven sons to the Li family and my father did truly love her – theirs was absolutely a marriage made in heaven. For my mother, it was a step up to a better life because her family was much poorer than my father's. She felt lucky to be with him.

After my training at the Academy in Beijing, I went to America. I think my family all had big hopes that I would do well. All my brothers had a sense of responsibility to be able to do something better to help the family but with me training for the ballet and then leaving to go overseas, those hopes were even bigger. I was probably the only chance to help

them change their fate – and that’s precisely what I did.

The truth is, even when I was chosen to train to dance, I still didn’t know that my dream was achievable until a marvellous teacher at the Beijing Dance Academy said that if I worked hard and became a good dancer I could then help my family in return. Ballet suddenly gave me a focus and a purpose.

Once I was able to help financially, there were many things I wanted to do for my mother – buy her nice clothes, send her money so she could eat better, buy her an apartment – plus help my brothers.

I invited my father and mother to America when I was at the Houston Ballet, after I had defected, and it was wonderful to be able to do that. Mum was totally happy for me and it was probably only then that she realised there was a bigger world outside what she was born into.

Both my parents were incredibly shocked at the beginning – even seeing a refrigerator, an escalator, an elevator, the incredible offerings at a grocery store and the huge supermarkets were revelations to them. My mother was particularly amazed to be able to find cooking ingredients in the Chinese grocery stores that she couldn’t normally even find in China. Even just drinking – to drink a beer at mealtime – shocked them. They were made speechless by the amount of waste in the western world. They just found it insane to find perfectly wearable clothes in the trash dumps; to throw perfectly edible food away. They were utterly fascinated and they were absolutely thrilled to see how my life had evolved.

I was always careful and I am still quite careful, really, because I don’t believe in excess. I am not sure if I learned that only from my mother – growing up without anything teaches

you many things. We can afford almost anything we need now but I think you still should never forget where you have come from and the values you have been instilled with. I greatly appreciate the opportunities I get today and the privileges we enjoy. You know, even wearing nice clothes, driving a car, being able to have money to go to a restaurant, or go to the theatre, or see a movie, or go on a holiday with your family – I still think it's incredible and I don't take any of it for granted.

If I had to describe my mother to someone, I would say this:

My mother was incredibly generous and had a big heart. She was kind to everyone – not just to her family. She was very resilient – both my parents have always been – but I think that was certainly the way parents of that time had to be in Qingdao. My mother always saw the glass as half full, never half empty – that was a beautiful lesson I learned from her.

When things really got tough at the Dance Academy, and even before that, I kept telling myself, you know, there are so many beautiful things in life – there are so many positive things for which you should be grateful. That was how my mother behaved, how she dealt with situations. You learn from your parents by watching how they behave – not necessarily by what they say. At times, when there was no food, my parents would just refuse to eat. They said: 'You go ahead, we are not hungry,' but you'd know the truth. We all knew.

My mother has just passed away. She was still living in China. She was happy there because there were a lot of cultural barriers for her to live a life in the West. I am always busy during the day and, even though she would be very friendly to anyone she met when she visited us here in Australia, it really was

hard for her to communicate and be understood. Plus, there are six other children back in China – and grandchildren – and for the Chinese, that family unit is very important.

I saw her about once a year. It's been quite special for my children to understand how much their grandparents sacrificed, how much they've loved us and how important they've been in shaping my character.

My father passed away earlier. 'Mellowed' is not the right word, but her love for him really transformed him and I believe she helped him realise his potential as a man. He was always a decent man but through her love, her cleverness and her communication skills, he became an incredible, wonderful man.

I only remember one fight between them, when he drank too much at a friend's wedding. At the time it was the scariest moment in my life. I thought my mother and father were headed for divorce but after that, somehow, they got even stronger. For a long while after that he did not touch a drop of alcohol, and I think he realised how much he'd upset her. She made him a much better man. I think that was a wonderful example for the children to see.

One of my earliest memories from when I was a child is when I was a few years old and I went to one of my playmate's houses to play. His uncle gave him a toy car – a tiny little toy car that he had bought from the city. He showed it to me and it was something I had never seen before. I had never seen anything that beautiful in my life, so when he went to get some water for us I took that car, then I went home and I proudly showed it to my mother because I swore that my mother or my family would not have seen anything that beautiful either.

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She asked me: 'Where did you get it?' and I said: 'I found it on the street.' I couldn't say I had stolen it but she knew of where I had been and who I'd been playing with, so she could see the truth.

She grabbed my hand and led me back to the friend's house. She made me apologise to my friend and his mother and then dragged me all the way back home. She sobbed after we got back because she knew she had humiliated me, but she wanted to teach me a lesson. My parents had always said to us: 'It doesn't matter how poor we are, how desperate we are, you can't lose integrity, lose dignity as a person – so never do the wrong thing.' It was such a valuable lesson. I never forgot it.

My mother was obviously proud of my career, but the fact that I am a decent father to my children and a decent husband to my wife and a decent son to my parents, as well as being a good sibling to my six brothers – I think that was probably what my mother would be most proud of. She would be happy that I became a responsible person – not a selfish one.