

# Looking In My Mirror *By Diana Raab, PhD*

When I look into my mirror, I see a 68-year-old woman who has encountered many emotional, mental, and physical challenges in her life. I see a woman who, at a quick glance, looks to be in her forties or fifties. Her glistening shoulder length wavy dark brown hair with red highlights is nurtured once a month, in an effort to hide the row of gray hairs framing her face.

When I look into what people call my deep-green eyes, I see a woman who has lived many lives. If you care to sit down with me for an afternoon tea, you might be blessed with some of my life stories beginning with being prematurely born, raised by a narcissistic mother, surviving bed rest with three pregnancies, and encountering two cancer battles.

In my face I also see someone who holds many secrets that began years ago, while in my mother's womb. I felt the weight of my mother not wanting to have a child. On the other hand, my father: a Holocaust survivor wanted to help replenish the world's Jewish population—six million lost to the horrors of the Nazis. My mother: never a lover of children fought my father's efforts and finally succumbed to his desires. He convinced her that she'd need someone to care for when she got older. In those days, not dissimilar to today, women had a longer lifespan

than men.

My mother's pervasive negative attitude and sense of despair permeated her pregnancy and the amniotic fluid that nourished me for nine months. Years later, my feelings were validated when my father confessed that my mother had actually preferred a bird over a child. Before I was born, he bought her a parakeet, but two days later it flew out of their bedroom window. Now, at ninety, my mother is widowed and realizes her husband was correct. I would be the only one who would care for her aging needs once he was gone. Holding my father's heart and soul, that's exactly what I did and continue to do.

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From the day I was born, my father worshiped me. He worked long hours and always had a special toy or treat for me when he walked through the door. Even before going to his room to get ready for dinner, he'd call for me, hold out his arms signaling that he wanted to give me a big hug. I was blessed because he was also the one who taught me the fine art of loving compassion. Since my early years, I've found female relationships challenging.

Another thing I see when I look in the mirror is a secret which for decades has rested in my psyche. There was a certain amount of shame associated with it, which is why I call it a secret. When I was

ten years old, my grandmother and caretaker died in her bedroom beside mine. In Queens, the suburbs of New York. It was the weekend, and my parents were working at their retail store in Brooklyn. I knocked on my grandmother's door and she did not answer. I quickly phoned my parents from the pink dial phone in their room. They rushed home as I sat downstairs facing the street where my parents would drive down. My nose was glued to the living room's bay window, waiting in terror. All I remember is the creaking of our wooden staircase as my grandmother was carried down, strapped to a stretcher. She was then rolled into an ambulance and gone forever.

After she died, my parents mourned in silence and rarely spoke about her. The silence in my home amongst the adults was almost deafening. Even before my grandmother died, my grandfather, who also lived with us, was rarely home. My grandparents did not have a good marriage and tended to avoid one another, although he also worked at the Brooklyn store. When he was not there, he took the train into New York City for fine dining and Broadway shows. At home, he sat glued to the small television in the living room and rarely spoke. I don't even recall what his voice sounded like. The deep sense of dismissiveness about what happened to my grandmother

left ten-year old me very confused, lonely, and lost. I have strong memories of hearing my mother crying and seeing her curled up on the black vinyl sofa. All the mirrors in the house were covered up. She wasn't much of a practicing Jew, she just did not want to see herself crying. Unlike myself, my mother always tended to veer away from mirrors. She was afraid of the aging process, which was shown by the wrinkles on her face and the crepe skin on her legs and arms.

Years later, undertaking a school assignment to write an essay about my grandparents, I asked my mother directly what happened to my grandmother. She opened a kitchen drawer filled with all sorts of papers and handed me my grandmother's death certificate. In the box that described the cause of her death, it stated she'd ingested a fatal amount of barbiturates. At the time, I didn't think much about it. When I felt suicidal years later just after my grandfather died, I wondered if I'd end up like her and take my life because I was depressed. The image of my grandmother lying on her bed with a book on her chest and an empty bottle of sleeping pills on her headboard is ingrained in my memory. Especially now that I'm a grandmother, I'd never want to leave that image with my grandchildren.

Looking in the mirror after raising children and being a grandmother of five, I see that I've become more self-aware. I look at each facial wrinkle as a journey through time. I have spent a lot of time inquiring about those life experiences, beginning with not being a wanted child, leading to my grandmother's death. When I look in the mirror and into my eyes, I can see the penetrating wound left by losing my grandmother. It's as if the childhood trauma grasped every cell in my

body. When in graduate school, I had the urge to research and write about my grandmother's life and ended up writing a memoir called *Regina's Closet*, about her life and our relationship. I still have difficulty processing the pain. Writing has always helped me navigate any discomfort but on some days, it's challenging for me to wrap my head around it all.

Sometimes, I look in the mirror and am simply grateful to be alive in spite of all my challenges. I see these all as gifts, because from all bad often comes good—even though some researchers have correlated childhood trauma with cancer later in life. One particular study from the 1980s discusses ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences), and shows that those who have encountered childhood traumas are three times more likely to develop cancer. Further studies have corroborated those findings. In addition to my sense of abandonment, after my grandmother died my adverse childhood experience revolved around being silenced and living with a mother who always put her own needs first.

When others look into my eyes, they may or may not see my pain. Chances are, they see a blissful, sensual woman who has decided to transcend the pain and disappointment of her past, someone who has chosen to see the light through the darkness—another trait I inherited from my beloved father who died too early at the age of 70.

When I stare in the mirror long enough, I get a faraway look that transcends this world and forces me to relive all the lives I have lived. My mother was only thirty-one years old when she lost her mother. They were very close. My mother took her mourning seriously and was unable

to deal with my grief. My mother was an English major in college and also a journal keeper, so when my grandmother died, it was natural for her to give me a journal. It was a Khalil Gibran journal and she told me to write about my grandmother and my feelings towards her, including the first ten years of my life under her care while she and my father worked long hours. From a young age, I'd learned that writing in my journal was my way of coping with all the other losses in my life. As an only child, I'd found that my journal also became my best friend and confidant, and even all these many years later, it continues to play that role in my life.

When I look in the mirror, I see someone who is compassionate and caring. I see someone who puts the needs of others before her own, sometimes to the detriment of her own health. I also see someone who has made many contributions to help others achieve their full potential by coaching them to write their memoirs. I know and understand both the emotional and physical pain they encounter. I know how to recognize and navigate through it. Being a professional writer, I realize that sharing my stories and my narratives helps others who are going through their own challenges.

Finally, when I look in the mirror, I realize that without having experienced the darkness in the past sixty-eight years, there would be no light. I am a woman warrior, and someone who has been productive in overcoming life's challenges. I am someone who forges ahead with strength and courage, one day at a time, and my only wish is to continue on this path.

What do you see when you look in your mirror?