

On Second Acts and Such

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 08 January 2019 09:45 - Last Updated Wednesday, 09 January 2019 06:08



When my mom was in her mid-50s, and all four of her “chickens” had finally flown the coop, she decided to go to graduate school and study English literature. Apparently, she’d had such fun typing *my* grad school papers – payback for making me take Latin in high school instead of Typing! – that she wanted to try her own hand at literary criticism, so she enrolled in night classes at the University of Alabama, Huntsville.

The oldest of four sisters, I was long gone by then, already living in South Carolina, and since Mom didn’t need *me* to type *her* papers, I never saw one. (This was the early 90s, the Olden Days, before digital data was regularly zipping back and forth between people.)

When I was home this past Christmas, Mom found one of her research papers from that period and I brought it back to Beaufort with me to read. It’s called “The Dressing Up of the Tale: Clothing As Language in The Scarlet Letter,” it’s twenty pages long, and it is *brilliant*. So good, in fact, I had a momentary hankering to haul out my old Hawthorne anthology. (Don’t worry. I’m over it.) Here’s the thing:

I had no idea my mom could write like that.

None. She’s a math person; she majored in economics and briefly worked as a computer programmer for IBM. She’s a numbers gal. Practical. Not the type to wax metaphorical or skate along the edge of an abstract idea.

Or so I thought until I read this paper. Mom’s professor back then – a Brown graduate – wrote a two-page critique at the end that began like this: “I’m quite taken aback by the grace and unabating quality of this paper. I knew you had the writing gift, but I think you have outdone yourself here. It is, to acknowledge the fabric of metaphor in which you show this book to be woven, a seamless performance.” Wow!

I love imagining my middle-aged housewife of a mother in that graduate program, with all those 20-somethings – what courage it must have taken! – surprising *even herself* with her newfound abilities. And here’s the kicker: Eventually, she couldn’t make her schedule work and she ended up dropping English for Studio Art. Thus began a love affair with painting that lasted

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the better part of two decades; she still dabbles today. And much like with the writing, she's really good! This housewife/mathematician/literary scholar has shown her still life paintings in galleries all over the southeast.

Obviously, my mother will be mortified when she reads this piece. But it's really not about her. Not entirely. It's about a woman – could be anybody's mother – who spent almost 30 years raising a large family, then discovered a whole new world of gifts – her own – and developed them. And is still developing them today, 25 years later.

Y'all know I don't give advice – I don't feel qualified – but I do like to share inspiration. And here at the beginning of a new year, as I prepare to send my own child out into the world next summer, I find my mother's story wildly inspiring. I thought you might, too.

Serendipitously, just as I was considering this idea for a column, somebody sent me one of those emails that tend to circulate this time of year. I have not fact-checked the info therein, but I have no reason to believe it's inaccurate and feel perfectly comfortable sharing it with you.

At age 23, Tina Fey was working at a YMCA.

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 23, Oprah was fired from her first reporting job.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 24, Stephen King was working as a janitor and living in a trailer.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 27, Vincent Van Gogh failed as a missionary and decided to go to art school.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 28, J.K. Rowling was a suicidal single parent living on welfare.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 28, Wayne Coyne (from The Flaming Lips) was a fry cook.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 30, Harrison Ford was a carpenter.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 30, Martha Stewart was a stockbroker.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *At age 37, Ang Lee was a stay-at-home-dad working odd jobs.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Julia Child released her first cookbook at age 39, and got her own cooking show at age 51.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Vera Wang failed to make the Olympic figure skating team, didn't get the Editor-in-Chief position at Vogue, and designed her first dress at age 40.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Stan Lee didn't release his first big comic book until he was 40.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Alan Rickman gave up his graphic design career to pursue acting at age 42.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Samuel L. Jackson didn't get his first movie role until he was 46.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Morgan Freeman landed his first MAJOR movie role at age 52.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Kathryn Bigelow only reached international success when she made The Hurt Locker at age 57.*

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□□□□□□□□□□ *Grandma Moses didn't begin her painting career until age 76.*

□□□□□□□□□□ *Louise Bourgeois didn't become a famous artist until she was 78 . . .*

□□□□□□□□□□ You get the drift. We've all heard it before, but as a new year comes into focus, it's nice to have these tangible reminders that "it's never too late." You're never too old to try something new. But here's the catch: Trying something new – if you want to become really good at it – might very well mean giving up something old. There are only so many hours in the day, after all, and you still gotta sleep.

There are hobbies I already fiddle with that I'd like to take more seriously – birding, for instance, and photography – and other things I'd like to pursue that present a much steeper learning curve for me, like painting and gardening and, embarrassingly enough, cooking. (Jeff says "heating" is not the same thing.) To carve out the time for these pursuits – any of them, really – I'll need to cut something else drastically, and I'm painfully aware of what that something should be: the time I spend reading, writing, and conversing on the Internet.

I know I say this with some degree of regularity – that I'm going to cut back on social media – but that urge is growing stronger. The other day, I received an "anniversary greeting" from Facebook informing me that we've now been together for *ten years*. I recoiled in horror! That's a decade of my life I can never get back. I'm not self-deluded enough to pretend that I'll be dumping Facebook altogether, but it's clear that we need a serious break – especially if I'm going to follow in my mother's footsteps, hopefully inspiring my *own* daughter one day.

I need my space, Facebook. It's not you; it's me. (Actually, it *is* you.)

So what about y'all? Anybody else at a turning point, like I am? Out with the old, in with the new, anybody? The rest of your life is calling. How will you answer?