

CINDY GOWEN

## 5. SAILING AND THE DAD CONNECTION

It started with hearing the water slap the sides of the boat. Or maybe it was just being on the water and the motion of the gentle waves and the sun on my face. Something was addictive to me about sailing. I hung out with friends of friends that had a boat. I learned how to sail myself and then how to crew. I volunteered for the Oceanic Society of the San Francisco Bay so that I could spend more time on the water. I taught sailing and worked for free. I had this dream or vision of being on the seven-day race to the Hawaiian Islands.

I took my new girlfriend to every harbour around the bay and at the coast to “just look” at boats. After a few years of this I bought my own boat—a 21-foot Catalina sailboat. It was a used boat but in excellent shape. I named her *Whistling Dixie*.

I was lucky to have lots of friends who were willing to try sailing. I tried to be a clear, calm captain, but many times I’m sure I was not.

Weather permitting, I was on the water each day of every weekend and, during the summer, in the evenings too. I just couldn’t get enough.

Then one day it hit me. It was the sound of the waves lapping the side of the boat that was the most soothing. This sound was the most calming influence in my life. Why was it so compelling?

I think it’s because it connected me to my father who had died 26 years earlier. It took me years on the boat to put this together. The sound of the water was like the sound of his voice to me, as if I was on the water with him again, the sounds of fishing together on the lake in North Carolina. I now had a way to be close to him that I had created without even knowing it.

The love poured back from him as I understood this. I could feel him smiling at me. I know he’d have been proud of how I handled my little watercraft, which was twice the size of his largest fishing boat. I remembered he had always wanted a Boston Whaler.

I come from a long line of fishermen. My grandmother Bernice, my father’s mother, was an incredible fisherperson. Every summer I would travel down to Florida to see her. She would take me out deep-sea fishing. I also remember fishing with her at my Uncle Hoot’s farm and off the piers into the Gulf of Mexico. If I caught anything worth catching she would report it to the local newspaper as the catch of the day.

I wonder now—as I write this—if fishing with me brought her son back to her? Could she be reconnected with him by teaching me? I wonder who taught my dad to fish.

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This idea brings tears—that I might have given her some joy after losing three husbands and a son. She looked for most of her joy in the bottom of a Black Velvet Canadian Whisky bottle each night before dinner.



*My Grandmother: Bernice Duffy 1964.*

This gossamer thread of connection to the water, the sea and its wildlife now moves forward to my children.

I took Grace fishing a few years ago. I still say: “You’ve got to hold your mouth just right,” just like my dad and Bernice use to say to me.

Now as a parent, I can see this was just a way to get me to stop talking and give them some peace.

There are many ways I am still connected to my father. He’s been dead over 40 years now; still, I can be moved to tears as I write about these connections. These are happy tears and missing tears—they mean I still remember and that he is still important.

Some of these connections are: cooking, grilling, travelling and meeting new people, driving in the car on long road trips, anytime I’m around horses or cows, the smell of leather, and freckles.

And, of course, all I have to do is look in the mirror and the female version of him looks back.

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