

Welcome to the world

Cheryl L. Rice

Posted: Tuesday, September 3, 2013

About this time last year, I visited my father for lunch and he sent me home with a dozen oatmeal raisin cookies, three novels for my husband, and a 3-by-3-inch box holding an 8mm tape. The tape was dated June 17, 1964, two days after I was born. He found it when cleaning out a closet, but didn't know what was on it.

I had the tape converted to a CD, and placed it atop my "to be read" pile on a red wooden end table beside my desk. For two weeks I glanced at the CD with both eagerness and hesitation. My mother had died a few months earlier and I knew it contained her voice - a voice I was just learning to live without. Based on the date neatly stenciled on its case in black and white, I expected it to be a recording my mom made for her parents soon after I was born. At that time, she and my father were living in Philadelphia. Her parents were in her home country of South Africa.

I readied myself to play the disc on the Jewish holy day of Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement, when Jews ask for forgiveness of their sins so they may be inscribed in the book of life the following year. It is the holiest day of the Jewish year. My mother cherished this day and its rituals of prayer, fasting, and quiet reflection. Since I was especially missing her on this day, I decided to play the CD and resurrect my mother's 22-year-old voice.

To my surprise, the first voice I heard was my grandfather's: "This is Cheryl Lee's birthday tape. It is recorded on the 17th of June, 1964, as Granny and I wait for our telephone call to be put through so we can congratulate her, her parents, and her grandparents, the Rices, on her arrival on the 15th."

Tears immediately spilled from my eyes. It had been almost 13 years since I heard my beloved grandfather's slightly mischievous voice, and even more years since I heard Granny speak.

For nearly 10 minutes there was anxious conversation between my grandparents and the overseas operator, all of them trying to find the correct phone number and the right hospital. Next, they had to persuade the person at the hospital to allow a call after visiting hours. Finally, the information was gathered and the call went through.

The relief in my mother's voice when she heard her parents on the phone was palpable. She wearily but proudly proclaimed me a healthy, beautiful, 6-pound baby girl who resembled her sister, Sandy. Hearing this, my grandfather began to weep.

My grandparents spoke briefly to my father, who was holding and feeding me at the time. My grandfather encouraged him to make sure Mom didn't do too much when she returned home. Then, a few minutes later, promises to speak again soon were made, tearful "I love you's" were shared, and the call ended - but not the celebration, as the next hour of the recording consisted of congratulatory messages from 25 of my grandparents' close friends and relatives who had gathered in their home to celebrate my arrival.

I could hear, one by one, my grandfather greeting each visitor at the door, "Clara, come here and record your well wishes for Linda and Howard and their baby girl, Cheryl." Then each guest exuberantly shared his good wishes: "Mazel tov, Linda and Howard." "Welcome to the world, little Cheryl." "Knowing Linda, I'm sure she's a beautiful baby." After about eight or nine friends had spoken, my great-uncle urged the revelers to raise their glasses and toast my parents and me. Then he led the group in a South African rendition of "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow."

Hearing the rejoicing my entrance into the world had prompted was startling. A party. Tears of joy. Wine and song. What was next, I wondered - a marching band parading through their living room?

I played the tape hoping it would assuage some of my homesickness for my mother, never expecting it would also assuage a deeper homesickness within myself. Most of my life I have struggled with self-worth - believing my value was contingent on a fragile combination of accomplishments and waist size. Never before had I known a time when I, Cheryl Lee Rice, lived in the world with no confessions to make, nothing to atone for. Atoning for my limitations and foibles was not something I did only on Yom Kippur. My birthday, or the first day of the year, or even the start of school in September were occasions to take stock, make amends, and set new goals for being a better, more worthy version of myself.

But now I was being introduced to a moment when, cradled tenderly in my father's arms, I was beautiful, wanted, and whole. How astonishing to hear myself being welcomed into the world with merriment and song. What I had spent my entire life doubting - namely my inherent worthiness - was now turned upside down with the undeniable evidence being played back to me on tape. Oh, my delight in finally meeting the "me" who has been there all along - my essential, irrefutable, wholly lovable self. No apology necessary.

So bring on that marching band.

Cheryl L. Rice, a leadership and life coach in Glenside, is currently working on a memoir. E-mail her at cheryl@yourvoiceyourvision.com.

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