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Menopause?

When George was born in 1953, at least three nurses at Florence Nightingale Lying-in Hospital asked me if he was going to be my last baby. I was already aware that, by standards then current, I was an “old” mother. I certainly didn’t feel old, but on my first visit my obstetrician had assured me that I would be okay, that *his* mother had been thirty-three when he was born. It was my first clue that thirty-two was past the norm for a first pregnancy. Paul and I had been married for almost ten years; our friends and families had been worrying us because we didn’t have children, but we were fortunate in being able to follow our own desires rather than theirs. George was our first child and, we hoped, not our last, but as “older” parents we were anticipating the fashion of the eighties and nineties, when women even in their late thirties and early forties elect to have their first babies. Everything went well, and in our joy of having our “perfect” George I, especially, resolved that I would not be a typical late mother by over-zealous attention to him.

Paul and I had made many positive statements about what we would not do when we had children. Now, we had to figure out what we would do. I had cause to reinforce my resolution not to dote when George was eighteen months old and we moved next door to the Funderburghs who were older than we and whose son David was a couple of years older than George. Polly typified almost everything I didn’t want to be as a mother and she tried, by example, to show me the errors of my ways. When I put George in the back yard to play, for instance, Polly would hang over the fence entertaining him so that he wouldn’t be lonely and to make sure, as she told me later, that he would not hurt himself. Actually, I was getting little done in the house as I peeped through the windows overlooking the yard to be sure that he met no harm. I wanted him to be able occasionally to enjoy himself without help. It was obvious he would have to learn that lesson in other ways, not in the back yard.

When George was joined by Roland a couple of years later, I still felt like a normal mother, even though my rapidly graying hair meant to most people that I wasn’t. Several times strangers asked me if I didn’t enjoy looking after my grandchildren. At the same time, I was enjoying the company of really young mothers as the boys reached school age and I became involved in all sorts of motherly activities such as PTA and Cub Scouts. Meantime, I was continuing my reading education in the many facets of parenting. I was especially attentive to the advice about sex education for growing children. I hoped to be able to achieve the ideal of giving just the right amount of information when it was indicated by my child but never providing more facts than he wanted or needed at the time.

My first opportunity for the overt giving of a combination of sexual/ethical advice came, interestingly enough, from Roland, the younger of the boys. He must have been about three when he and I were on the way to pick up George at school. He was standing, as was his wont in those pre-car-seat days, behind me just at my left ear. His question was provoked by an appeal at church the day before for a fund for girls in a home for

“unwed” mothers. He startled me by asking, “How can they be mothers if they aren’t married?” Ah! Here was my chance, unexpected as I found the form of the question. I gently explained the situation, emphasizing the ideal of a mother being married so that the child would have two parents as well as other advantages. I must have been carried away by my own eloquence at this, my first opportunity to “perform” as a really good mother. Roland did ask a question or two that showed he was listening, but well before I had finished, he sighed heavily and asked plaintively, “Do we have to talk about this any more?” I renewed my resolution to try to remember in the future that first rule of not telling more than *he* wanted to know.

There was a long hiatus before the next overt incident. I suppose the boys’ sexual education was progressing to their satisfaction from indirect information obtained at home and from conversations with their friends. George must have been about seven. I was cutting his hair, giving him the then fashionable buzz which both boys preferred to going to the barber. The only difficulty I saw in that operation was that I never saw all that money I was saving by being their barber. As I whirled the clippers across his head, George suddenly said, “What is menopause?” MENOPAUSE? That was not one of the questions I was prepared for. Stalling for time, I asked, “What made you think of that?” He pointed to the *Good Housekeeping* magazine on the table near him. There in bold print was the promise of an article on menopause in that month’s issue. So, my answer wasn’t so difficult, after all. It was simply a new word. I gave a brief explanation both of the term and of the need for such an article in a woman’s magazine. Then, we went on to talk of the current status of major league baseball.

I’m sure we had many other discussions over the years about sex, both the facts and the obligations attached thereto, but those two incidents always pop into my mind first when I think of some of the parenting questions I faced during my apprenticeship as a mother. I still feel that being a late mother kept me young and certainly provided great satisfaction along the way.