

Selected Excerpts from
My Story, My Song: Mother-Daughter Reflections on Life and Faith
By Lucimarian Roberts, as told to Missy Buchanan
With reflections from Robin Roberts

INTRODUCTION

(Robin Roberts)

The mother-daughter relationship is one of life's glorious mysteries. Can I get an Amen? It can run the gamut of emotions. I'll let you fill in the blank yourself. I'm grateful to God for blessing my mom with many years on this earth. It has given our relationship a chance to evolve and grow. From shouting matches that ended with mom saying: "Why? Because I'm the momma and I said so, that's why!" To seeing her as not just my mom but as a true, dear friend. (I'm still trying to figure out how that happened too.)

Good Morning America viewers grieved with me when my beloved father died in 2004. They marveled at my mother's strength and grace after his passing. Stories that include my family have been well received by the GMA audience. Folks are drawn to mom's humility, wisdom, and spirituality. Countless times I've been told: "Your mother should write a book." Well, just like the beautiful hymns I have been blessed to hear mom sing...this is her story.

SINGING BECAUSE I MUST

On most days, I slide onto the piano bench just as the evening shadows fall across the living room of my Mississippi home. It is my refuge. It is where I come to meet with God.

There are songbooks and hymnals stacked in a basket in the corner of the room. Usually though my fingers just take to the keys without conscious thought. Most often it is an old hymn that takes flight. Like a prayer with melody reaching far back into my childhood.

I know that God is always with me, but there's something special about having a particular place to meet together. As I look around the familiar room, I am reminded of both the joy and the heartache that have dwelled within these walls. This is the welcoming place that our family called home after living in twenty-six other places while my husband, Larry, served as an officer in the US Air Force. It is where I came to help heal my broken heart after Larry died at age 81.

This is the place where laughter and music have filled the rooms during holiday gatherings with family and friends. It is also where the flood waters of Hurricane Katrina swallowed up the entire first floor, destroying every memento and home furnishing in its muddy grasp.

Today in the solitude of this refurbished room, I play the piano and sing.

I sing words of songs that I memorized as a child growing up in the 1920s and 30s in Akron, Ohio. I sing tunes I learned at school and in my grandparents' home whenever the family would gather around the piano for a sing-along. I sing the spirituals and songs I first heard in the small Church of God where my grandfather was a lay pastor.

I sing because the music of the church speaks my soul language. I sing because these songs are tightly woven into the texture of who I am. Lucimarian Tolliver Roberts. Child of God.

REFLECTION FROM ROBIN

The first Thanksgiving after daddy died was so hard. Mom came up to be with me in New York. Being at home would have been too painful. My dear friend and colleague Diane Sawyer, who was at my father's funeral in Mississippi, insisted we join her for the holiday. We had appetizers at Diane's home and dinner at Candice Bergen's. (I was so worried mom was going to call her Murphy Brown.) After saying the blessing, I'll never forget how mom leaned over to me and whispered: "How can you have Thanksgiving dinner without mashed potatoes?" I think it was the first time I had heard momma laugh since daddy died weeks earlier.

The most beautiful sight for me is seeing mom at the piano. I can hear her sweet voice right now. In fact, I don't remember a time when music did not fill our home. Mom made me and my siblings take piano lessons until a certain age. Then it was up to us to decide whether or not to continue with the lessons. As soon as it became "optional," I

bolted for the front door— no more piano lessons for me. It's one of the few regrets I have in life, especially when I see how much comfort it has brought into mom's life.

LEARNING THAT IT'S NOT ALL BLACK & WHITE

During the time that Larry was stationed in Japan, I was the only black woman on base and often felt very lonely. When I was invited to participate in a bridge club with other military wives, I jumped at the opportunity even though I was not an accomplished bridge player.

I had become a substitute teacher at the American Dependents School, and the school's principal was known as the best bridge player around. Over the course of a few weeks, I began to notice that if I was paired as the principal's partner or was even playing at the same table, her game was somehow off-kilter. It became obvious that she was distracted, and I was pretty sure it was because of me.

Over time, the principal and I each transitioned from the school to the base's education office where we continued to develop a friendship. One day while having coffee together, she opened up about what she had been feeling during our first encounters playing bridge.

"When I was growing up, there were always colored people in my home, but I never had to socialize with them," she said.

She went on to explain that she had been raised in Georgia during the days of racial segregation. Her family had employed a number of black household workers. She was accustomed to having African Americans on the backstage of her life but not as her equals. Then she said something that gave me pause. She confessed that she'd had an aunt who often said that if she got to heaven and there were colored people there, she'd rather go to hell.

I actually felt encouraged by this woman's honesty. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to have been in her shoes, raised in an environment where hatred and skewed perceptions were deeply ingrained in her life from a young age. I was also grateful that my mother had helped me understand that if you focus on building relationships, the walls of prejudice eventually will come tumblin' down.

STANDING ON HOLY GROUND

Less than a year after Larry died, Hurricane Katrina ravaged the Gulf Coast. I was holed up in my Biloxi home with three other family members, silently questioning my decision not to evacuate and beginning to wonder if we would live or die. As wind ripped off portions of the roof, Katrina plunged me into the arms of God. Yes, we were exposed and vulnerable, but there was comfort and hope in the promises of God as we sang and prayed. The rain-soaked carpet beneath my feet was indeed holy, for God was in our midst.

Just two years later, I stood with my daughters Sally-Ann and Dorothy at the bedside of my youngest daughter, Robin, who was about to undergo surgery for a cancerous tumor in her breast. My thoughts flashed back to the young girl who had sat so dangerously close to the edge of the pier, swinging her legs. No matter how old our children are, we want to keep them safe and healthy. A mother's prayer formed on my lips. *God, please protect my child.* I opened my eyes to look down and see the feet of Robin's sisters surrounding her hospital bed. It was another snatch of holy ground.

Over the years, I have learned that wherever we stand is holy ground if God is revealed and revered there. In thinking back, every time our family gathered for a holiday celebration and we sang hymns, held hands and prayed together, God was among us. Today when I look into the faces of four generations of family members and give thanks, I am reminded that even my own living room is holy ground.

OPENING THE DOORS OF OPPORTUNITY

Though I never made my goal to be the first woman of anything, I can't help but smile a bit when I look back and see how doors opened up to me, even as a middle-aged and older woman. I was the first woman to serve as president of the Mississippi Coast Coliseum Commission. First woman to chair the Mississippi State Board of Education. First woman to serve on the board of directors of the Mississippi Power Company. I also chaired the New Orleans Branch of the Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta and served on the advisory board for the Boys and Girls Club of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Then at age 87, I learned that I had been awarded the Mississippi Medal of Service for contributions made to improve local communities and the state.

Thinking back, it seems that each opportunity came from somewhere out of the blue. And with every new task came another occasion to meet new people and learn things that would help me along the way.

GROWING OLDER, CELEBRATING LIFE

A few years ago, I was homeless. At least that's how I felt. It seemed that at my late age, I had no particular place to go, no place to call home. Hurricane Katrina had turned my world upside down. My home in Pass Christian was uninhabitable, and I wasn't sure if I should sell it as-is or refurbish and renovate it. My second home in Biloxi had withstood the hurricane but had been severely damaged from water and wind. Then just a few months after Katrina had made her unwelcome arrival, I had a dreadful bout with pneumonia. For a while I lived in a rehabilitation center, wondering where I would go when I was released.

When I think back to that hard season of life, I realize I was still numb from everything that had happened in recent years. Within a short period of time, my life had unraveled through a series of tragic events that began when my son-in-law Willie Craft, Sally-Ann's husband, was diagnosed with colon cancer and died just six months later. The next year, my husband Larry suffered a heart attack and passed away unexpectedly in his sleep. Soon after, I was diagnosed with a neurological disorder and a degenerative bone disease that had my daughter, Dorothy, ushering me to countless doctors' offices and hospitals. In August of 2005, Hurricane Katrina blew through the Gulf Coast. Then in 2007, Robin received the devastating news that she had an aggressive form of breast cancer.

I lived in a hazy fog during much of that period of time, waffling back and forth on almost every decision. Seeing that I was weary and worn, my grown children took charge of my life as best they could. I think we were all wondering if I should just pull up stakes and move from the Gulf Coast. But where would I go? I had already tried a couple of senior living options, including an assisted living center near Robin, but nothing seemed quite right. I kept asking myself what I was supposed to be doing at this stage of life. In all honesty, I felt frazzled and totally useless.

Even in those dark days, my faith was my source of comfort. Today I am happily back in my Pass Christian home where I play my piano and sing hymns each day. I have a home health-care aid to assist me several times each week. Physically, I have good days and bad. There are times when my joints are stiff and my words are slow, but I am reminded of an important truth. God has given me purpose that overcomes pain.

Over the span of my long life, I have learned many lessons. To be honest, I am learning them still. Out of the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, I discovered not to prize possessions too highly. I grieved the loss of many special objects. The copper wall plaques we'd brought back from Japan. The china vase hand-painted by Larry's aunt. Our stereo and collection of old record albums. My organ. Even now, there are times when I suddenly think about an item only to realize that it has been lost forever. I have also discovered what it's like to lose a loved one in a heartbeat. But through every loss, I am learning to loosen my grasp on things of this world and to cling to good memories and to God instead.

I have also come to understand that having a sense of humor helps to offset the challenges of growing old. My spirits are lifted whenever I hear laughter around the dinner table or at a family gathering. In fact, I often think that humor may be God's best gift to those of us in late life, a salve for difficult moments.

As my mother grew older, she sometimes talked about death and what she wanted for her funeral. She dreaded the thought of people looking down at her lifeless body laid out in a casket, then muttering some nonsense about how natural she looked. In her opinion, no one really looks natural when they are dead.

When my mother passed away, my sister and I went to the funeral home only to discover that our mother had bright red nails and lipstick. Dee and I looked at each other and burst out laughing, thinking back to what mother had said. Sally Tolliver had never worn nail polish or lipstick, so we were certain that no one would look at her and say that she looked natural! Sometimes you just have to laugh.

Thinking back on all the stories of my life, there is one story that shines especially bright in my memory. My mother loved to tell it, perhaps because it captured the essence of who I am and what I believe. As I explained earlier, during the Depression my mother cooked on a wood stove in the basement because our electricity had been turned off. There was an occasion when my father was home between drinking binges, and we were seated for dinner at a makeshift table in the basement.

For some reason, I began to sing. My father looked at me sternly and announced that there would be no singing at the table. After a few moments, I got up from the table, went outside to the screened-in window that opened to the basement and pressed my face close. I began to sing words that just bubbled up inside me. "I've got a little song in my heart, and I'm going to sing it." I didn't intend to be funny, but even my father couldn't resist a laugh. I suppose I just couldn't be silenced.

I reflect back on my long life and realize that I still sing because I have a song in my heart and a story to tell. About the people who came alongside to encourage me on this journey of life. About a family who has given me bountiful joy and priceless memories. About a God who has been with me each step of the way and will walk with me until I've finished the last mile.

REFLECTION FROM ROBIN

The stories and wisdom in this chapter were the main reason I prayed mom would write this book. It can be difficult to watch our parents age. We must remember it's even more challenging for them. To slowly lose one's independence— being able to drive, to live self-sufficiently. My siblings and I have all asked mom to live with one of us but she has refused. She says she doesn't want to be a burden—as if she ever could be that to us. You know what? She still slips me a \$20 bill when I come home. She calls it "greasing my palm." She's a proud woman.

Yes, at times the child feels like the parent, but it's so important not to make an aging parent feel like a child. What helps me is knowing that my mom has been and always will be a child of God.

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