

Thank God for Mama

Wide-eyed and cautious, we leaned out of the beige kitchen door to study the gray, three-story porch from one end to the other. This rear entrance opened up onto not just our porch but our second floor neighbors' porch as well.

Both sections were enclosed with the same three-foot-tall railing, topped with a splintery three-inch banister. The two balconies formed a common open space with a ramshackle stairwell in the center. Below was the mostly hard-dirt courtyard, with a cement walkway leading to the back alley where the garbage cans were stationed.

I was ten years old, my brother Greg was eight, my sister Barbara seven, and my cousin Butch nine, and we felt especially lucky on this early morning because our neighbors had not come outside yet. Mama had left us alone in our four bedroom apartment for a few minutes and we decided this was a good time to enjoy a little adventure.

The lackluster porch was transformed into a racetrack as we ran back and forth from one end to the other and dashed up and down the rickety winding staircase, barely touching the frail wooden banisters. Even if we had held on tightly, those skimpy planks offered very little protection, and would not have stopped us from falling onto the concrete pavement, three stories

below. Oblivious to the danger, our youthful exuberance bubbled over in laughter as the whistling wind wrapped around our fresh frolicking faces.

We formed two tag teams. One team member held the back door open with an extended arm, leg, foot, backside, or other available body part so we would not be locked out. The other team member was free to race.

Life was grand as we soaked in the summer sun. Then Barbara announced she had accidentally allowed the back door to slam shut.

"Oh my —!" slowly seeped from my lips as I shook my head to each side.

We were locked out!

Soon to be found out!

"Aaaah," "woohhh," "noooh," and other undistinguishable grunts of desperation rumbled within my chest.

I whispered under my breath, "Why the h... didn't we listen to her?" Chaos was definitely about to ensue because Mama was guaranteed to be upset. She had repeatedly pleaded with us to stay in the house until she returned from a quick errand across the street.

Being the oldest of the juvenile renegades, I called upon my colorful childish creativity to concoct a fabulous tale that would explain why the four of us were on the porch instead of in the house. As I groped for words that I hoped would save our collective behinds, I could tell by Mama's frown-

ing brow and silent stride toward her bedroom that we were in big trouble! Mama swiftly returned with Dad's feared leather belt, which was reserved for punishing brazen acts of rebellion.

With this, we did what any right-thinking, naughty, African-American child growing up on the west side of Chicago in 1963 would do—we ran! The chase was on—we scattered like a water-filled balloon hitting the parched concrete pavement.

Where did Mama get the energy? She managed to steer clear of the shrieking cat, side-stepping it before stumbling and almost slipping on the clothes hurled at her by Greg, who was desperately fleeing from the whipping he knew he deserved. He dived head first on the floor and squeezed his wiggly little body through the wooden legs of a dining room chair, all to no avail. Mama caught his squirming feet and delivered three lashes to his backside using Mr. Belt. As if in an elaborate dance, she continued by whirling around the bedroom door, folding Barbara over her lap and delivering three tough-love smacks across her diminutive rear end as well.

Much to my cousin Butch's surprise, he too received three strikes across his fluttering arms as he zig-zagged passed her. He was flabbergasted that he was being disciplined even though he wasn't Mama's offspring.



Without skipping a beat, Mama dashed to the bunk bed where I was hiding. In one grand swoop she pulled me out and delivered four lightning-quick licks to my bare legs as I hopped from one foot to the other. This chase was quite different from the one we had been enjoying just moments earlier. Mama made sure of that!

After all the commotion was over, we kids timidly gathered and analyzed what had happened. At first we accused Mama of being a killjoy and overreacting to our innocent fun. But we also realized that Mama was motivated by the memory of the fear she felt the previous year—when my four-year-old sister Linda experienced a near-fatal fall from that same third-floor staircase, sustaining a concussion and enduring the resulting violent convulsive seizures.

Looking back—after raising three sweet but rascally children of my own—I greatly appreciate Mama’s vigilance, stamina, and wisdom and have tried to continue the traditions she taught me. Although I know some have

abandoned the practice of spanking—not to be confused with the extremes of child abuse—I praise God for Mama’s lessons and applaud her loving parenting skills. She taught me to take time to explain things to my children by giving them clear verbal guidelines and warnings. However, if my children refused to heed verbal correction, at times I was obliged to respond accordingly to Proverbs 13:24, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is careful to discipline him” (NIV).

Thanks to Mama’s swift and diligent confrontation of our disobedience, we were saved from the danger of that staircase and other harmful temptations. And God continues to use parents (and others) to make us aware of our sin so that we can turn from our destructive ways and remain safe. I pray that we all learn to listen to God and to the Mamas of the world who protect us from ourselves.

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