

Eric Seiley

Generativity After 50

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Who Stole Your Mojo, John Irving?

A memoir about dime novels, my mother, and sadly realizing John Irving novels suck.

My mother was a liar. A liar and a biblioklept. Which meant she told lies with almost no remorse and shoplifted most of the books she read. Both were passions of hers for as long as I can remember.

“Why?” I once asked her. “Why lie? Why steal?”

“Because fuck them, that’s why.”

That’s what she said. Fuck them. My mother had no difficulty speaking openly to an eight year old child. About any matter taboo or otherwise. We just had that kind of relationship, I suppose.

Mom could also be enigmatic. Which made it hard for most people to tell when she was lying even though she insisted she was always scrupulously honest, if only to herself. And she could change course on a dime. Once, when my father took a short business trip out of town, she decided to quit talking till he returned. What she didn’t say was she also relapsed back into her pain pill addiction which meant, for a week, we kids took ourselves to and from school and made our own dinners. Till Dad returned and we kids were forbidden from mentioning what had happened. When Dad asked Mom about her noticeable ten pound weight loss, she just shrugged and said, “Busy with the kids while you were gone, hon.”

Mom's duality started early in life, stemming from an unhappy childhood, and continued into a depressed, overweight adulthood. She never seemed happy for long, which few people knew because she took pains to project a jolly, pleasant image at all times in public. But I knew. My brother and sister knew. And my father most certainly knew. We all understood she was not happy unless she was eating, reading, or lying - though I do think there were times when her children and husband made her equally happy.

"Part of the reason I lie," she once admitted to me, "is knowing how few people, including all those churchgoing, pious Congregationalists who see me as some fat Christian woman, realize I am even lying to them. I cook for them and make quilts for their bed and yet they don't even know me. Let alone what I think of them. Most of them believe I like them."

Such ironic subversiveness seemed all the more wonderful to her when it was she who intentionally pulled the strings.

"I tell them what they pretend to want," she explained, "because they don't really care for the truth. About themselves or others. Let alone the sincere me or the real you. You'll understand this when you get older because most people are like this. People are selfish and only want you to make them feel better about themselves. Crave it actually. But rarely do they reciprocate unless there is something in it for them. It's an unfortunate choice in selfishness. Pretending to care but failing to make the effort when actual friendship is required. Which makes them hypocrites. They are the liars, distorting the truth, ostensibly pretending to be good people when they are not. And because they are, I am able to use their hypocrisy against them. No honest person is ever fooled by me."

When I looked a little shocked at her admission, she reminded me, "It's not anything particularly new, you know. Such lies have been inherent in all cultures, all languages, and all forms of communication since the day Eve told Adam it was okay to take a bite of the apple she picked for him."

Mom history 101.

According to Mom, all lies, fibs, and falsehoods were effectively her act of subversive rebellion against the personal selfishness of others while simultaneously being an ethical way to hold herself honest, if only to herself. Whatever that meant.

"It's a psychological kind of thing. Very Meta. Something I learned firsthand from the nuns."

Mom was raised catholic in California during the 1950's and 60's when the parochial school system rivaled the Spanish Inquisition for its harsh mandates and even harsher treatment toward children. The "nuns" weren't above using physical and emotional abuse to "save souls" and, ironically, ensure an entire generation confused God's love with religious hypocrisy. Combine that with her abusive and alcoholic parents – who themselves were dogmatically Catholic – from whom eleven children were produced in as many years without enough financial means, or personal love, to sustain any of them. And there you find the root of my mother's little "quirks."

Her west coast catholic upbringing defined my mother to the point she honed a pious outer shell, along with a subversive inner nature, as defense against a parochial system that refused to reward a homely girl's intellect, even while educating her. Nor did the nuns fail to react violently against any perceived defiance, including smoking, drinking, shoplifting, and back seat "make out" sessions with boys. All of which Mom developed

a taste for in her teenage years despite outwardly serving tradition and receiving communion while attending Holy Cross High as a precursor to entering the convent.

Books, she marveled, became a pleasant side effect discovered between trouble with boys and trouble with nuns. Books, much to Mom's delight, were not only fun to read, but also totem. They protected her from the nuns. Of course, she had to disguise her more "adventurous" reading under false covers that were selected to show how good a daughter and devoted Catholic she was. Which was bullshit and the oldest trick in the book, but neither nun nor parent seemed interested in calling her out for it, preferring to leave her to her quiet task. The lesson being read what you want, but make sure you look like a good Catholic when you do. And always cover your tracks so not to invite judgement.

If the stringent expectation for my mother was to maintain appearances as being perfectly catholic, then in secret she decided she would subvert those demands by choosing the only thing left under her control, telling lies. Which very few people realized she was doing. And by reading books, which were always of the "bad" variety.

What started as a defense mechanism practically became her religion.

John Irving has crazy mojo. His novels testify to this. But more on that later. For now, just know John Irving's mojo saved my life during a time when my mother tried to forfeit her own.

Mom could read. In fact, she could read so fast, she finished whole books before the ink had even proverbially dried on the page. Which meant she finished a lot of novels in an

average weeks' time. And size didn't matter. She could read a mammoth 900-page chronicle like Centennial (1976) in less than a week and still have time to dust off one or two little pulp fiction affairs. So, as a result, she always had stacks of books lining the floor along the walls of her room. Books were her "religion" remember. And since my father was a policeman who worked the nighttime "graveyard" shift most of his career, the arrangement worked well. He left for work after dinner. She cleaned up, put us kids down in front of the tv, and then retired to her bedroom with a pack of Marlboro cigarettes, a bag of Sandies cookies, and her latest book - which she had most certainly shoplifted from the grocery store earlier that day - to read.

Flowers in the Attic, The Valley of the Dolls, Sybil, The Minds of Billy Milligan, Roots, The Executioners, Looking for Mr. Goodbar, The Deer Hunter, and so on. Mom liked to read all those populist paperbacks of declining years that lined entire supermarket aisles back in the 1970's. And when she read, we children were not allowed to interfere or interrupt.

When Mom read, she enforced two immutable rules upon pain of deadly punishment: one, do not disturb her unless the house was on fire. And two, do not create a mess she would otherwise have to clean up. Other than that, my brother, sister, and I were left to do whatever we chose between the hours of dinner till bedtime.

During our younger years, those hours were filled with pillow forts, card games, board games, and whatever the three of us could think up. We set up the front porch as headquarters since it was always the coolest place in the evening and furthest from our mother's room so she couldn't hear our loud hooting, angry screams, or anguished cries when a game was lost, or an argument had. Those were joyful nights. But as we grew into our teenage years, our individual interests took hold.

Pam, the oldest, took to her room to play records and dream about boys. Records of Helen Reddy and Linda Ronstadt gave way to Pat Benatar, Blondie, and the B-52's on cassette as her teen years settled in. Posters on her wall changed from pre-pubescent Shaun Cassidy to teenage heartthrob Rob Lowe, circa 1980's. And the music never stopped. She played song after song - over and over and over - as her mantra to life and her solace from life. When one song seemed to say it all, she would play it repeatedly, nonstop, till she had worn down the cassette. To this day, I cringe when I hear, "Call Me" or "Rock Lobster" simply because of the nauseous number of times Pam played those songs repeatedly from her bedroom.

Joel, the youngest, dominated the living room by turning it into his personal fortress of solitude. There he could read comic books and leap from couch to couch pretending to be whatever superhero took his fancy. On weekends he'd play Dungeons & Dragons or Road to Catan or whatever comic book game he and his equally awkward friends were into. He was excitable, but benign unless he got careless. Then we had to watch out for him. Pam and I always held our breath whenever we heard him fall over the sofa performing one of his patented "superman" jumps. We weren't concerned he was hurt. No, we were worried our mother would hear the thump and issue the only warning we were likely to receive.

"KNOCK that shit off! Don't make me come out there!"

Under Mom rationale that meant punishment was brewing for all of us based on any one sibling's violation of her immutable rules. And any slightest additional offense would set her off. We knew from experience, when enraged, she could cover a lot of ground quietly and hit hard with impunity. So it was important to listen and make a run for it if we had time. The slowest always getting the worst till the survivors could either circle back to the rescue or Mom's arm became too tired to continue her fury.

Ahh, 70's parenting. So gentle. So genuine.

I, for my part, "got the reading bug" and, with library book in hand, would often retire to my room after dinner, tuck myself into a corner chair, and read books. I loved it. I read a lot during those years. Especially during summers with their long, long days and endless nights of no responsibility. In the summertime, I hardly left my room even though, as a result, I often gained weight from sitting around reading and snacking too much.

"You're the only kid I know," my father used to growl, "who gains weight every time he cracks open a fucking book. Do a few pushups why don't you. Or run a few fucking laps around the fucking block for fuck's sake. And put the fucking book down once in a while. Fuck!"

My father, the great linguistic admirer of fiction.

I will say this about my father. Despite any misgivings, he never refused to drop me or my siblings off at the downtown Public Library every Saturday after lunch. In fact, he insisted on it. He wasn't being altruistic though. Dropping us kids off downtown was what constituted babysitting back in the 70's. And while I read in the library for a few hours and my brother and sister crossed the street to the movie theater to watch matinee films, he drove home to our mother. Later, Pam, Joel, and I would walk the few miles to our grandparent's trailer and have dinner with them. Then we often stayed the night because we never knew whether our parents were going to pick us up or not. Saturdays, you see, were reserved for their "special" time together without having to be distracted by their three rambunctious kids. So I suppose it was win-win for us all. But certainly not altruistic.

During all those years reading, I progressed from your typical “boy” books to much more advanced selections relatively easily. The always appropriate books checked out each Saturday from the public library were my early education. Encyclopedia Brown turned into Alfred Hitchcock mysteries which evolved into Tarzan adventures which led to anything King Arthur. I read sci-fi, action, drama, mystery, fantasy, sports and adventure, and so on. Westerns came along as did select non-fiction. Once I even read a history book about Joan of Arc without realizing Joan - which I thought was French for John - was a girl. When I realized she was a girl by chapter 25, I threw the book across the room refusing to read further. That was how “boy” I was.

As far back as I can remember, I loved reading. In fact, one of my earliest memories is sitting in a sunlit room with my Mom – who was wearing her plaid wool work skirt - as she praised my pronunciation of words while I read a literal “Dick and Jane” reader to her. Reading was always comfort.

John Irving published fifteen novels over the course of his career. But he only wrote four good books. In the 1980's, his mojo was strong and he sent out four of the greatest novels any teenager could ever grow up reading. *The World According to Garp, The Hotel New Hampshire, Cider House Rules, and A Prayer for Owen Meany.* A rare feat of drama, poignancy, and literary humor very few authors have accomplished before or since.

According to the French magazine, *Le Monde*, most distinct are Irving's “themes on the subject of sexual freedom, social justice with compassion, and dramedy of devastating irony, quiet provocation, comical obsessions, and priapic debauchery.”

I don't know about all that, but as a teenage reader, Irving's captivating storytelling, no matter how melodramatic, spoke to me during a time when my mother's suicide attempts meant she couldn't.

Like my mother, I embraced books as part of my daily existence. But unlike Mom, I decided not to follow her footsteps down the path of lying. Sure, I dabbled early on, but somehow, even in my youth, I knew her philosophy derived more from insecurity than authority. And her subversive nature was rooted in bitter resentment from her younger self rather than any act of true rebellion. I promised myself I would not feel that way about life, or myself, ever.

Still, when I think back, I realize this is as much a story about my mother and how her maladaptive traits resulted in unintended positive outcomes for her children.

Maladaptive traits such as letting me read the most inappropriate adult books no self-respecting mother would ever let her child read. I know this because my fifth-grade teacher once discovered a very inappropriate adult book visible in my open backpack which she questioned me about. When I told her my mother gave it to me, she looked angry and called me a liar. Then lectured me about my "sinful nature" and how such "smutty" material was obviously influencing me for the worst. The book? Tall, Blonde, And Evil by Greg Hamilton. A slutty, misogynistic paperback from the 1970's. Ironic. But that's how it went.

Because of Mom, I had access to all those 70's pulp fiction books of a populist nature that once lined the supermarket shelves and magazine aisle.

It happened like this:

One day, on a Tuesday as I recall, I came home from baseball practice only to discover I had forgotten my library books, along with my backpack, at school. My mother had no sympathy and no inclination to drive me back to school to retrieve my things, so I was stuck without reading material. I became bored. And with nothing new to read, frustrated. Frustrated enough to risk my healthy tushy – since my mother liked to swat hard when annoyed - by going to her room after dinner hoping against hope she would have mercy and take me to the library. She did not, but to my surprise, she did toss me one of her grocery store dime novels with the suggestion I “go to town.” The book? Flowers in the Attic by V.C. Andrews. No joke. Flowers in the Attic by V.C. Andrews for a young boy.

Now, in hindsight, offering a young boy Flowers in the Attic screams of parentally questionable decision-making. But it was the 70’s and the book did give me something to read. And I read it. Quickly. And as I read, I noticed a new feeling, all strange and weirdly enticing, churning just below the pit of my stomach. Even though I did not like the book, even though it scared me a little bit, I did not want to stop reading either. The word for this condition, I later learned, was “titillation” and remains a perfect description of how I felt back then. And so, over the following years, whenever I ran out of reading material, or just had the urge, I went to my mother’s room at the back of the house and grabbed a book from the piles stacked along the walls. Mom’s dime novels became their own sort of “Dick and Jane” reader introducing me into the world of “adult” fiction. Coma, Ioni: An Unforgettable Story, Semi-Tough, Tell Me That You Love Me, Junie Moon, The Minds of Billy Milligan, The Thorn Birds, Clan of the Cave Bear, Salem’s Lot. And so on. Some made me uncomfortable like I was eavesdropping on adult fantasy (Shampoo and The Stepford Wives). Other books were plainly disturbing (thank you Amityville Horror)! And some were surprisingly fascinating (good for you Roots and The Postman Always Rings Twice). Even if I didn’t always

like them, I did finish reading them for the most obvious of reasons; they were compelling enough that I wanted to know how the story ended. And so I learned an important lesson about escapist books; sometimes it IS just about reading them.

It was on one of my last forays into Mom's books I discovered my first John Irving novel, The Hotel New Hampshire. The armadillo depicted on the cover was a curiosity, so I picked it up and took it back to my room to read. And was completely enraptured from the start. The writing so much better than the pulp fiction I had been reading, with themes much more poignant and meaningful (to a young boy at least) than all those PG stories from the public library. The story was a little tough to resonate with being so far away from my own southern upbringing. But nonetheless I was absolutely fascinated and titillated! I felt like a grown up for the first time in my life - mature enough to read and understand (mostly) such an adult book.

And so I jumped on the John Irving fiction band wagon and read and read and read. Because reading an Irving novel made the outside world become a distraction, and the "real" life happen inside my head.

After The Hotel New Hampshire came the excellently absurd The World According to Garp. After Garp came the dark tendrils of hope in Cider House Rules. And after Cider House came the lyrical melancholy of A Prayer for Owen Meany. Each book progressively more wonderful from one to the next. Until it wasn't so any longer.

In the mid-1980's, as my brother, sister, and I were well established in our teenage years, something curious happened. Mom connected with an excellent psychotherapist and, for a time, became the mother we had dreamt about. She stopped sleeping as

much, stopped isolating, was no longer depressed all the time and became attentive at home. Even going so far as to wait for my brother, sister, and I after school to chat about our days and listen to our thoughts on the matter. She cooked and cleaned and was as close to Betty Crocker as we had ever known her to be. A mother out of a story book. And she wasn't faking. Or lying. Or hiding in her room reading. Or so we thought. For a time, life with Mom seemed remarkable.

Those "good" years coincided directly with the "good" Irving novels and became indelibly linked in my mind for years after. But so did the downturn.

Sadly, Mom's happiness was another illusion and did not last. She committed her most serious suicide attempt at the end of the decade and nearly succeeded in overdosing on pills had a co-worker of my father not accidentally discovered her. Simultaneously, I found Irving's novels also began to lose their mojo to the point I wondered if Irving's personal demons were catching up to him as well and affecting his writing. Both Mom and John began a state of decline that mirrored each other. John writing less cohesive and more confusing novels. Mom falling back into pain pill addiction, depression, and putting up a false front to the world.

When Mom came home from the hospital, she always reverted to her "old" self.

Sleeping long stretches, reading in the evening, and generally not wanting to interact with anyone much.

John Irving also changed. His novels began failing and his mojo all but drained away.

No longer able to translate his personal struggles from life into novel form, yet still technically skilled, Irving published one terrible novel of messy confusion upon the next for many following years. Novels so cluttered, confusing, and, let's just say it,

terrible, I questioned the author's sanity. No longer sensical, just a big mess. More *The Lion in Winter* with Alzheimer's than the Elder Statesman of Literary Works.

I did try to speak with my mother about her suicide attempts after she stabilized and seemed to be living comfortably, but she refused. It being the one thing in her life she wanted to keep private. A matter between herself, her counselors, and "God."

"I don't want to lie to anyone any longer. Especially HIM," she explained pointing to the sky, "which I most certainly would do if I tried to talk to you about it. The guilt and shame are still too hard to face. I love you, but I don't have a lot of insight and wouldn't know how to reconcile what happened for you even if I could."

I let it go at that, but it wasn't hard to see my disappointment in her. And in John. When I really needed both to offer some kind of insight, neither were. Which didn't seem fair. When you realize your mother would rather quit this world by killing herself, leaving you and your siblings to grow up alone, it takes a bit of insight and unconditional love to get past such a loss of innocence and regain your fortitude. I had to do that on my own as an adult.

My family still had a few good times here and there after those years, on holidays and graduations, weddings, vacations, grandchildren, and all. And though my love for Mom faltered occasionally, as hers had with life, I still had those four good years with her and those four good John Irving novels.

I will always be thankful Mom introduced books and reading into my life. Like John Irving, my mother might have lost her mojo, but she continued fighting on after all her failures. And I love her for that. I can sympathize over the years of abuse she suffered

at the hands of parents and nuns and even learned to be grateful for the warmth of lies she offered growing up. Mostly, I appreciate the “good” of her forever linked in my heart to the four “good” Irving novels I read. I visit both when I feel a bit of nostalgic.

I do wish my mother had not lost her mojo so early in life or tried to kill herself so many times. I wish she had let the “real” her out more, the vulnerable, tender person who could enjoy the gifts life offered and not let depression, and her subsequent pill addiction, get the best of her. I wish she had enjoyed her own life more. But she grew tired with age fighting addiction and depression and ended up living in a “truce” style of existence. Seeking out the few comforts left to her - food and television - and avoiding all else including her grown children and their children.

I do not know why the hurts of her formative years blockaded her journey into adulthood so severely, but of course I have my guesses. She never made peace with them nor ever talked directly in detail to us about them. I am sure her “fuck them, that’s why” attitude and preference for rebellion didn’t help her as much as she thought it did in life. But I loved her, sometimes conditionally, the best I could. And I tried to ease her pain when possible. And I always took the lessons of her life to heart.

So thank you, Mom.

I love you.

The End.
