

Erin Barrett

SYNOPSIS

Short:

As the daughter of a missionary in the hot, gritty, Cantonese-speaking colony of Hong Kong, I learned a lot about faith. How it can buoy you across the world, teach you to adapt to a vastly different culture with joy, and sadly, how it can alienate you from those you love most. My mother guided me down her path of faith that lead me to a dead-end, and left me struggling to understand the ambiguous, gray areas of life.

It took my step-daughter, a flailing 19-year-old grappling with an unexpected pregnancy, and a daring, shaky leap toward her, over a wide chasm of doubt, to finally understand the value of true faith—a leap that ultimately taught me how to mother my own daughter and heal myself.

[Essay below]

BIO

Short:

Erin Barrett is the author of over two dozen non-fiction, pop-culture and general interest books, and the co-writer of “Random Kinds of Factness,” a syndicated daily fun facts column that appears in newspapers throughout the United States. She also works as a freelance editor, graphic designer and runs a series of creative writing classes in the Bay Area of San Francisco. She’s currently working on her poetry and an accompanying memoir of her childhood in Hong Kong.

Long:

Erin Barrett is the author of over two dozen non-fiction, pop-culture and general interest books, and the co-writer of “Random Kinds of Factness,” a syndicated daily fun facts column that appears in newspapers throughout the United States. She also works as a freelance editor, graphic designer and, along with her husband, author Jack Mingo, runs a series of creative writing classes in the Bay Area of San Francisco.

A recent graduate of New College of California’s Culture, Ecology and Sustainable Communities program, Erin raises chickens and bees and brews her own biodiesel in her small urban backyard. A passionate environmentalist, she spends much of her time

working with various sustainability-oriented groups in her area.

Erin's most recent endeavor is the co-founding of the Alameda Creative Writing and Interdisciplinary Arts Program, a group designed for professional writers to expand their portfolio. The program supports and encourages participants during the two-year certification program in writing, the arts and interpersonal work. Erin's focus is in poetry, symbolism and archetypes.

She lives and works from her home on a former U.S. Naval Air Station in Alameda, California, with her husband, two children, three cats, two dogs, ten chickens, a small vegetable patch and a canoe.

ESSAY

Faith of Our Mothers

by Erin Barrett

What I remember most from that winter morning was the feeling of being stuck in time, and the sense that this was a test—perhaps an ultimate test for me, on what it means to be a mother, a daughter, a woman of faith.

I was on the phone with my step-daughter Helena, who had gone through rough years during her teens: alcohol, drug-addicted boyfriends, anger, sadness, running away. She had made some progress but wasn't completely out of the woods yet at 19. She continued to be unable to make peace with her mother, a woman lashing out, at a loss to find contentment in her mid-fifties. She struggled to find resolution with her Dad who'd left her mom when Helena was just thirteen.

Helena had rejected high school at 15, then college, then the whole contiguous United States at 18 to go study alone in France, her mother's childhood home. Study may be over-stating things a bit. She'd gone to learn French and to escape a life here that felt as though it was squeezing her soul.

“Don’t tell my dad, but I’m pregnant” she’d said over the staticky, overseas connection that morning.

My mind reeled. “What are you going to do?” I asked, feigning calm. I hoped the staticky line would mask the panic that bubbled up.

She couldn’t answer. She didn’t know, or else why would she be calling me?

Why did she have to tell me? Why couldn’t she just talk to her father? I knew the answer to that. He’d voice all of the things I was now feeling. We both would have the same concerns and worries. Mainly, how could this girl with already shaky self-confidence go through pregnancy and raise a child? But in their relationship, he had often—naturally—worn his reactions on his sleeve. His worries weren’t something she could face right now. Mine, she could. What she didn’t necessarily understand that morning was how gut-wrenching this was for me. I’d been there, too, not much older than she is now, alone and on the brink, struggling with self-doubt and self-loathing, with no one around to believe in me. In that time, it started making sense that perhaps having a baby would fill the longing and give me the faith in myself that I desperately needed.

Faith had been a prominent theme in my life. As a child, I grew up in Hong Kong, the daughter of Southern Baptist missionaries, going to church every Sunday morning, Sunday night and Wednesday night.

This type of faith was the foundation of my mother’s life and it manifested in various ways, many of which created a wonderful childhood. On our first journey to Hong Kong when I was four, we were the only passengers on a huge freighter ship surrounded by containers and a small crew. The trip took us completely out of our element: six straight weeks from New Orleans through the gates of the Panama Canal, and across the Pacific. It’s a trip I’ll never forget, in large part because of my mother. Each day she gave my

brother and me a new surprise; something to keep us busy without a TV or radio and with only a limited number of toys. She carefully planned and packed dozens of small, daily gifts to keep us amused.

One of the most memorable days was spent with a ball of twine. We wrapped it around bedposts and cabinet handles throughout our room, weaving an intricate maze to climb over, under and through as the ship lolled back and forth. Another day she brought out paper dolls and helped design, color and cut their clothes with me. Another day, scissors and typing paper created an entire Indian village, complete with tee-pees, braves and maidens. We whittled out small statues from scented bars of Irish Spring soap with a pocket knife. She helped my brother compose a message to put in a bottle to toss over the railing, and fantasized about where it might end up. (A man in Australia wrote him an answer years later.) I wasn't allowed on deck. The ship had no life jackets in my small size, but my mother's strong faith created the adventure and it buoyed me across the ocean.

Nothing could prepare me for the adjustments of moving permanently to a small, gritty urban colony located on the edge of China's mainland. Some say New York can chew you up and spit you out. Try the Cantonese version in a tightly-compressed, ten-by-ten square miles; a population so dense there was nowhere left to build but up; houses, families stacked on top of one another, one hundred and thirty floors and more above the concrete sidewalks.

After we were unpacked my mother jumped in with both feet while my dad started work. She traveled the dirty streets, learning the language. Linguists say it's one of the hardest languages in the world to learn, with eight separate tones that can completely change the meaning of its thousands of words. Undaunted, my mother bargained like a native with street vendors and store-keepers. Formerly a small-town Southern girl, she adopted new favorite foods: steamed chicken feet at dim sum, shark's fin soup at weddings, stinky durian fruit in the summer. She made the local markets, with pressed ducks and pig entrails in their windows, her haunts. She was a whirlwind of change.

Some of that seeped down to me. We made do, for instance, with thin Chinese-made mattresses on the floor for the first couple of months while we waited for our belongings. We sat on fold-up plastic stools in lieu of regular chairs. When she realized there was no liquid milk available, she experimented with powdered, adding ice cubes and more than the suggested amount of powder for a creamier texture and slightly-more-palatable flavor on the only western cereal available: stale corn flakes.

All of the rice had weevils; she washed and picked them out. When my mother wanted to make corn bread, she hunted down corn through broken Cantonese in the outdoor market, taunted by vendors who laughed at the crazy *sei gwei-poh* (damned ghost lady) looking for pig food. But she found it and we ate one of the foods we loved.

When water shortages hit the colony in the late '70s limiting the availability of tap water during the day, again my mother stepped up enthusiastically with a plan to keep buckets of water in the bathtub through the daytime for cleaning and emergency use. During raging typhoons, she taped the windows, placed towels under the doors as we played cards in the back room, waiting out the storm. On hot days with no air conditioning, she would crush ice to keep us cool. On cool mornings with no heat, she cracked the oven so I could dress in some warmth. My mother taught me to greet adventure with solution. Through language difficulties, weird foods, tropical heat and sweating crowds she taught me how to adjust. When I dwell upon the changes my mother had to endure and nurse her family through, it brings tears to my eyes. Her faith was stronger than steel. How else could she have done it?

As we grew into teenagers, though, it became harder for her to roll with the punches; to stay on top of the adventure. During those ambiguous grey-tinged pubescent times, solutions seen through God-colored lenses are often starkly black and white. Her faith—the fervent, near-unquestioning brand of it—made it difficult for her to simply listen to her children. While I was trying to make sense of my brother's drug addiction, she answered with helpless tears. The confusing world of boys and sexuality was also one I

did alone. She was unable to give me the information I desperately needed. Through fights with peers, trouble in school, experimentation with cigarettes and alcohol and music, she responded with God-based platitudes on the smaller stuff and a painful helplessness when the situation grew larger than her faith-filled box of tools. My mother, when asked, would always say she believed in me or that she knew I'd figure it out, but it was her actions and the way she responded to my need that spoke larger: As a Christian, she wanted, *expected* me to be one, too, above all else. This meant that sin was sin and salvation was salvation, and never, except under the least offensive circumstances, the twain shall meet. At the time, her faith felt like a neatly wrapped gift to me, tied up with a pretty bow, and I was the monster ripping it wide open, leaving a wretched mess of things. This, she couldn't tolerate, and her focus shifted during those difficult years, away from me and my turmoil, and toward keeping her mission intact. Her faith wasn't large enough to encompass us both.

I remember first questioning her values and her ability to parent me during this time. My answer at 14 was to apply to a boarding school for Christian missionary children. Besides the option of moving stateside with relatives, as my brother had done when he was 17, this was really the only other alternative to staying at home. At the time, it felt like a safety net. There was comfort in starting over, and I did find a couple of adults who could listen, but I still often felt deeply alone in a sea of mission-minded, faith-based folk.

After years of struggling in high school, and then again in college, where I'd landed alone, stateside, I dropped out, found my way into an alcoholic first marriage at 22 and had two children in quick succession—anything to find a family and fill the longing. I was overwhelmed and out of control. Over the years, there were a number of escape hatches that I tried: my own drug and alcohol abuse (if you can't beat 'em, join 'em!), infidelity (again, my own), a career or three (house cleaning, web design and finally freelance writing). Eventually, I mustered the courage to move west to California, get a divorce, against all family wishes, and work at my writing career. It was during this part of my life I met my current husband and his daughter....

“So what should I do?” Helena’s voice echoed through the receiver.

Goddamn It, why me? What the hell do I say?

But this was it. I was either going to handle it with my rigid, unswerving belief that she’d made a mistake, had weakness in judgment, and wasn’t meeting my expectations, or I was going to be the mother I wanted to have; the one I wanted to be; the one who had faith in her children. She peppered me with questions: “Does it hurt to abort?” “How would this work?” “Will I regret having this baby?” “Will I regret *not* having this baby?” “How am I going to tell my parents?”

Finally, in a small, shaky voice, she spoke the simple truth, “Erin, I’m scared.”

It was in that moment I knew it was time to leap the great chasm. The earth trembled under me. It was now or never. Faith or no faith; her father’s wishes or not: “I know you are,” I said. There was no right way. There was no messed-up little girl needing my stern guidance. There was only one woman calling another woman and asking her to be witness to her experience. “Talk to me. Tell me how you’re feeling,” I said.

The conversation went on from there. I don’t remember specifics but I remember listening. A lot. I learned about her French boyfriend and his family’s farm. I listened as she spoke of her friends and the various decisions they had made or would make in the same situation. I listened to her concerns and worries about her parents’ reactions, and I felt her fear with her. I could hear her processing it with nothing more from me than a pair of good ears and an open, loving, accepting heart. It was all an act of faith that morning for us both, together. But it was a faith I’d never really understood before. It was swerving, Jell-o-like, uncertain, frightening and out of control, and it buoyed us together as we embarked on a brand new adventure that day.

I watch my own daughter and my step-grandson, Helena's toddler, playing his favorite wrestling game on the floor. She cradles him and feigns a take-down, glowing in his attentions. I wonder about my daughter sometimes as she begins her own struggles to find balance in a shakey world. I know that I will fight and curse, the earth rumbling under me, the chasm growing wide, and be challenged to take that leap of faith in her over and over again. Most days, it's still hard for me to know what's mine and what's hers. This is the dilemma of motherhood. But ultimately I know that life is uncertain. It can't be packaged neatly without boxing in everyone around you, and to instill faith in a child requires having faith — not in god, but in hers.

End.