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“User Upper” Par Excellence

My mother, Mildred Pauline Farlow Brooks, was a skilled “user upper” of things. Born in 1921 in the small town of Winterset, Iowa (think John Wayne and “covered bridge” country), Mom found herself smack dab in the middle of a family of seven children. Her parents ran a small cafe which helped them put food on their own table, but the depression years of my mother’s youth had a deep impact on her.

Mom’s elopement with my father during WWII didn’t brighten her financial picture any. My father’s work as a journalist GI was followed by jobs editing small town newspapers and teaching small town high schoolers how to write and interpret literature in the “Big Sky” state of Montana. Needless to say, Dad’s pay for all three kinds of work was meager. Over the course of my parent’s marriage, they produced five children. Like my mother, I found myself smack dab in the middle.

Given this brief family history, you can no doubt understand why it was that Mom became a skilled user upper of whatever happened to be available. She could miraculously stretch one roasting chicken, a handful of vegetables from her garden, and applesauce canned the previous fall into a nourishing and quite delicious family feast. Mom was adept at gardening, cooking, canning, sewing, and making bread from scratch. I can well remember

feeling despondent that we couldn't have the Wonder Bread sandwiches in our lunchboxes like our classmates did.

My mother was a wizard at turning out clothing and curtains and quilts. She used a pedal-operated, Singer sewing machine for years which she also used to piece together doll clothes and crazy quilts from the leftover remnants. I was in high school and finally earning my own money before I was able to make my first clothing purchase in a department store. Prior to that, Mom made everything, even my prom dresses and eventually gowns for my bridesmaids.

Although my adult life has been far less austere than my mother's, I strangely have picked up many of her penny-pinching habits — not out of need, but by choice. When asked to make a dessert, I find it deliciously challenging to scavenge my fridge and pantry to put something together with whatever items I happen to have on hand. Dinner is often a hodgepodge assembly of leftovers crafted into a makeshift stir-fry or casserole. My biggest delight is working the fridge down to its absolute bones before heading back to the grocery store. Mask making during the Pandemic allowed me to use up remnants of material leftover from previous sewing projects. And fresh vegetables picked from our "Victory over Covid" deer-proof garden make a delightful addition to summer lunches and suppers while stretching dollars otherwise spent at the grocery store.

Maybe this habit of my mother's which is has now become my own is a metaphor for what God asks us to do without time and resources. Perhaps He is saying, "Use up what you have — all of it— and then give thanks for the opportunity." After all, if we creatively stretch what is available, we will then be able to stretch out our hands to provide for the needs of others.

~Written by Bonnie Garbrecht

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8190 Lincoln Rd. Beulah, MI 49617
231.882.4241
www.benziestandrews.com



Benzie St. Andrews | 8190 Lincoln Rd | Beulah, MI 49617 US

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