

# A Change of Hearts

BY BILL VOSSLER

*My grandmother was a troublemaker.* From the very first time I set eyes on her, as she slammed open our kitchen door, rattling it against the hot-water radiator on the wall, she destroyed the peace and order in our newly-established home.

Supper stuck in my seven-year-old throat as she stood on the threshold, pontificating, the open Bible balanced in her left palm while she punched the air with her right hand, speaking half German, half English, exhorting how the Bible said the sins of the fathers would be visited upon the children



kitchen would fly open and this short, stocky, bowlegged bundle of energy would stand on the threshold, bright sunshine streaming around her like the pure light of

Grandma's greatest wrath, in those early days, was reserved for my mother, who had led Walter, Grandma's son, astray. Mom was a divorcee who had been alone for four years before she, according to Grandma, made an adulterer of my stepdad, because it is written in Matthew 5:32 that "...whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery." It seemed whenever Walter was not around, Grandma burst into our house reciting that line.

The sermon about the end of the world and the one about my sinning father were the only ones she ever repeated—two great opuses played again and again, with only minor variations, which burst forth depending on the new unpardonable sin one of us boys had committed—stealing peas or carrots from her garden, hunting birds with the BB gun or rushing through her backyard just across the street from us, startling her. In her eyes, Mom and her

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unto the third and fourth generations.

I might have only been age seven, but I knew the sinning father she meant, and it wasn't my new stepfather, her son, Walter. Sitting on the bench behind the supper table, I kept my eyes averted, hoping she would leave before a hole burned entirely through my stomach.

Mary Fetzer, my stepdad's mother, *Grandma*, wasn't actually my grandmother. But you wouldn't call her step-grandmother, and you certainly wouldn't call her Mary. At least once a week (for a while it seemed *daily*) the door to our

God, as she regaled us with her latest biblical discovery—earthquakes and wars and rumors of wars meant the world was about to end.

The reddish moon last night meant, she read, "The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord come," (Joel 2:31, KJV) which meant the end of the world. "Maybe tomorrow," she said. She spoke in a curious mixture of English and old German, forcefully punching the Bible with her forefinger, as she warned us of looming judgment. I waited to see if she would poke a hole through the pages.

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**AFTER THE BIRTH OF HER SECOND GRANDCHILD GRANDMA’S ATTACKS ON OUR KITCHEN DOOR CEASED ENTIRELY. SHE STILL WANDERED INTO THE HOUSE WITH THE OPEN BIBLE ON HER PALM, HAVING MADE**



**NEW BIBLICAL DISCOVERIES, BUT INSTEAD OF PREACHING SERMONS, SHE ASKED FOR MOM’S INTERPRETATION AND OPINION.**

three little issue were crosses she had to bear.

As I headed toward my teens, I began to notice a change in Grandma, or at least in her sermons. No longer did she accuse Mom of making her son an adulterer. She and Mom seemed to settle into a *détente* of peaceful co-existence.

She still slammed open the door, still gave us boys the evil eye, but her sermons were shorter and when she finished flailing the air, she walked over to the kitchen table and sat down with Mom and they talked.

Mom had recently given birth to a baby boy, and Grandma’s eyes grew soft, warm and wet when she gazed upon her first grandchild. She brought over covered dishes, asked if Mom needed anything from the garden or the Red Owl store, seemingly any excuse so she could see “*Der gloyna bove*” (the little boy).

After the birth of her second grandchild—another boy—Grandma’s attacks on our kitchen door ceased entirely. She still wandered

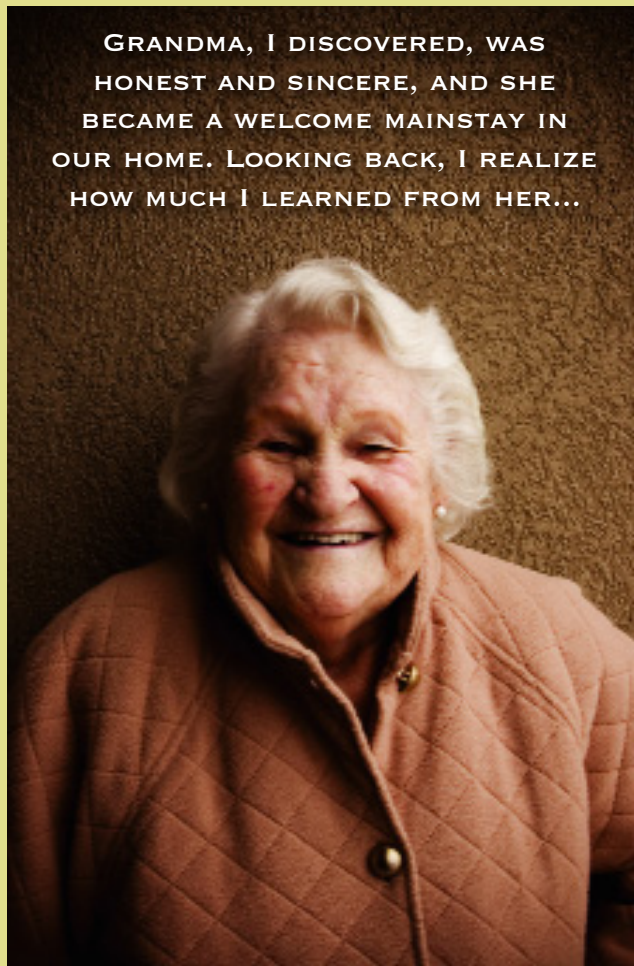
into the house with the open Bible on her palm, having made new biblical discoveries, but instead of preaching sermons, she asked for Mom’s interpretation and opinion.

She could still be tart, as once when she was asked how she liked babysitting Alma’s boys (we three oldest non-blood grandsons) and she said, “I’d rather herd wild horses.”

Or once when my brother visited her, wearing short pants and long

hair, she said, “Yah, you haff too much on da top and too little on da bottom.”

I don’t know who buried the hatchet—maybe both Mom and Grandma. But for the next twenty years these two women saw each other every day and worked side by side—butchering chickens, pigs, rabbits, making sausages, canning beets, pickles, *schwatomacha*, humming together, talking in low, confidential tones with sudden bursts of laughter.



**GRANDMA, I DISCOVERED, WAS HONEST AND SINCERE, AND SHE BECAME A WELCOME MAINSTAY IN OUR HOME. LOOKING BACK, I REALIZE HOW MUCH I LEARNED FROM HER...**

Grandma, I discovered, was honest and sincere, and she became a welcome mainstay in our home. Looking back, I realize how much I learned from her—the value of reading the Bible, of being your own person, of taking a stand even when others thought you were wrong, of speaking out, of searching for the truth, of working hard—the list goes on.

But the greatest lesson of all that she imparted to me was learning to bridge your differences. *Find common ground, no matter how difficult.* Be a peacemaker, for “...blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (Matthew 5:9, NRSV) □

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