

Apron Strings

Emily, Sukey, Molly, Hetty, Nancy, Patty, Kezzy, come close.

I want to remind you of those eight pillars of wisdom, which I instilled in all of you Epworth rectory. So:

1. Cowardice and fear of punishment often lead children into lying. So, there is no punishment for any child who confesses their fault.

And I too have my confession. In our youth, your father wooed me well with poetry and passion. Yet you may recall we didn't always agree. What was I to do, when he demanded I say Amen to his prayer for William of Orange? That man was no king of mine; usurping the Divine right of King James:

'No, Samuel,' said I, 'pray all night, if you will; but you will not hear *my* Amen.'
'Madam,' said he, 'if we have two kings, then we must have two beds.'

And so he abandoned us, because of stubbornness; or courage to hold my ground; you decide, my daughters. Only in 1702, after two-thirds of our house was spoiled by fire, did your father return. And, happy coincidence, another kingdom was claimed by a woman: Queen Anne succeeded to the throne.

2. There was to be no tolerance of sinful actions – pilfering at church, disobedience, quarrelling.

Your education flourished, until we were made homeless by a second fire in 1709 and you were farmed out to local families, like cattle. And a clownish accent and many rude ways were learned. Yes, Molly, no need to remind me of them! You may smile, but it distressed me to see you all so changed.

3. No child was beaten twice for the same fault – I see your eyebrows raised, Nancy: Honour thy father and mother!
4. That every act of obedience, especially when it crossed with a child's inclinations, should be rewarded.

I was not always obedient. Remember when your absent father hired a replacement clergyman for morning services? Yet dozens of parishioners, nay, I believe above two hundred one Sunday, preferred to join us at family evening prayers, which I led, than go to morning church. Who was I to hinder God's invitation?

Your father wrote, telling me, as a woman, to stop this immediately. I replied that he must command me to stop; otherwise I would be guilty of neglecting this opportunity of doing good to souls. No command ensued! Evening prayers continued. Perhaps this is why Jacky and Charles have women in leadership in the Methodist movement.

5. That every attempt to please be met with kindness and encouragement.

Your Puritan grandfather was a man of kindness and encouragement. In 1682, when I became an Anglican, still he encouraged me. His library, he made my library. I relished it.

6. That none be suffered to invade the property of another, even down to the smallest farthing or pin.

You know that each farthing was counted in our house, especially when your father was in prison for debt. In my youth too, our home was ransacked to pay fines.

7. That promises be strictly observed; and a gift once given is theirs to do with as they please.

But that gift once given is not forgotten. In May 1705, our three-week-old baby was overlaid dead by the exhausted nurse, after we were besieged half the night with pistol fire. Poor little precious gift ... and poor nurse.

The rest of you looked to me, always me. 'Mother of Methodism,' I am dubbed.
'Mother of mayhem' then, with ten of you:

[*apron up*] God give me strength. Not now. No. Not now. When the apron is up, you let me be, remember. What did I say? Not now.

[*apron down*] You soon learnt to give me that space.

But I couldn't hide behind it forever. You needed me. So, each day, I would bide with you in special time, alone. Remember? My method. Hence, our Jacky, the great John Wesley, asking me in my old age to write down these eight pillars of educational wisdom. Which leads me to:

8. That no girl be taught to work until she could read. That girls learning sewing before they can read perfectly is the very reason why so few women can read fit to be heard, and never to be well understood.

Never forget your strength. You share your brothers' childhoods and their present potency. Why is it always his-story? I do not believe some Divine dictate prefers men. I never sensed it so.

Susanna Wesley

Cathy Walker