

MOTHER: TO THE END

By: Gus Dick Andros

"You know this is our last session, and I would like to know what you think you got out of all the hours we have spent together?" Dr. Glazer asked. He had been my therapist for four years.

"Well, if I give it a lot of thought, I would say that I have spent all my energies trying to prove my worth to my mother, who has not been with us for over twenty years." I answered, fighting back tears.

"Where do you go from here?" he asked.

"Since I've been with you I have learned that if there is anyone to prove anything to it is myself."

"I think you have hit the nail on the head. I'm proud of you." Being unaccustomed to getting praise, I appreciated hearing this.

As I walked home, I said to myself, "You know you are free of the garbage that you have carried all these years. You're a successful teacher and have many students that love you. There isn't a show on Broadway or a ballet company that doesn't have at least one of your students."

Why was it that my mother didn't see the potential I had? Maybe I could have done more if I had encouragement from the beginning, or maybe because I felt the need to prove myself, I did more than if I had had the encouragement.

When I became one of the most popular boys in school without being a football hero, my mother seemed bothered by that and when she could, she would belittle me in private.

For example, when I lost weight during the summer between my sophomore and junior years in high school, instead of being proud of the self discipline which it took, I heard "You know you were nicer when you were fat."

"Mother, you have to be nice when you're fat." was my defense. She would lecture me all the time because none of my clothes would fit. I lost so much weight that the clothes could not be taken in and my mother only reluctantly bought me a new wardrobe.

I worked at our restaurant and I had my own spending money. I never had to ask her for money when I had a date. I was self-sufficient and only relied on mother for food and housing. I bought my own phonograph and records. Mother would tell me I was "record poor." That was her way of saying, "You spend too much money on records."

Maybe if I had to ask her for money for my personal survival it might have made a difference, but I thought I was freeing her of some of the responsibility.

Our house may have been a little unusual. I didn't know what happened in other people's homes, but in ours nudity was accepted and sharing the bathroom was commonplace. We didn't know that our bodies should be covered in front of each other. The only time that it made a difference to me was when I was fifteen, taking a bath and mother came in to use the toilet. It didn't enter my head to cover myself, nor did mother feel I should. Mother, looking at me in the tub, said, "You know you have the smallest penis in the family, but I think you are going to be the hairiest." I thought mother was out of place to have said that to me. It upset me so much that she never saw me nude again and the bathroom door was locked from that time on. I had been in enough locker rooms to know that I had nothing to be ashamed of. My therapist said it was the worst thing he had ever heard. I figured that mother was a virgin when she got married, so how many penises could she have seen?"

Dr. Glazer told me what my mother was really saying, "You will never be the man your brothers are," and after a moment I had to agree with him.

World War II was coming to an end. Since I had been classified as 4-F a year before, I thought that I had nothing to worry about and began to plan my future. I was going to the University of Oklahoma and doing very well.

"You know when the war is over I won't be able to afford to send all three of you to college, so because you have had the opportunity to go this last year, I am afraid that you will have to quit." mother said this as if she was giving me a weather report. She was unaware that the GI Bill would cover the education for all the veterans. Again I felt because I was the youngest, this was my fate. But I refused to take this without a fight.

"I don't mean to stop, I will go to Oklahoma City University and teach dancing for Mr. Kotche. He has asked me to teach for him when I graduate from high school, and if the offer is still there, I will."

I quit Oklahoma University at the end of that semester and entered Oklahoma City University. Mr. Kotche did hire me and I did very well teaching ballroom dancing to older women. At my age, every woman taking ballroom dancing was older than me. One day at the studio, mother called and told me I had a letter from the government. "Open it and read it to me." She did and it said that I had to have another physical. "But the war is almost over. What do they want with me now?"

"I guess you can stop a bullet as well as your brothers," was her comment.

I passed the physical this time and had three weeks to bring my affairs to a close. Oklahoma City University allowed me to make up the work so I could get credit for the semester. I had to work very hard to get all of the papers in and pass the tests.

"Why are you working so hard? You won't last two weeks in the service." Mother said, and I thought, "Just one more put down." Damn it! I was determined to make her proud of me even if I had to stop a bullet.

Fortunately I was singled out because of my college background to go to special school -- Transportation Information Program and was assigned to the enlisted men's club in Tokyo. Great duty if you have to be in the service. I was in General Mac Arthur's Headquarters Company. I tried to tell mother of my good fortune, but she didn't think much of it. Even when I was given a letter of commendation or when I was promoted to sergeant, she never acknowledged it, nor did she tell her sisters.

My mother wrote my brothers everyday, but I got a letter for every one I sent. At mail call on our arrival in Japan I was the only one that didn't get a letter from home. I never felt so alone and I didn't want to hear what the other guys had to say, so I left the camp area and walked for hours. I missed mother so much that I sold all my cigarettes to pay for a long distance phone call to talk to her. In 1946, getting a phone call from halfway around the world was not an everyday occurrence. Mother, who grew up without a phone, was thrilled to think that she was talking to Japan. I was happy to hear her voice and give her this opportunity

Being in the service was the best thing that could have happened to me. At nineteen I was in charge of a four-story building, ten GIs, two orchestras and eighty Japanese employees. I learned that I could take care of myself with guys from every walk of life. This was the man whose mother didn't think he would last two weeks in the service.

When I got my discharge I left three letters to be mailed a week apart to my mother. I wanted to surprise her, so I flew from Seattle, Washington, to Oklahoma City. I arrived in the morning and was excited to be home, because I had been gone for almost two years. The cab pulled up in front of the house and many of the neighbors were shouting, "Welcome home." This woke my mother and she ran out of the house in her nightgown and without her teeth--not exactly the welcome I had dreamed about. She was surprised because she had gotten a letter the day before. I learned from this experience never to surprise anyone again.

There was no food in the house and I was starving, so I went to the grocery store and bought some bacon and eggs. When I got back, I woke up my brother Dee to have breakfast with me. He seemed to be the happiest to see me, knowing what it was to be in the service, away from home.

The second day I was home, mother asked me what I planned to do. I had gotten interested in dancing working with the USO members at the club, so I told her that I wanted to go to San Francisco to study dancing. "That's not what I had planned, but if

that is your wish, it's okay with me." I wanted her to say, "You've been gone for two years, why not stay home and let's get to know each other."

Many times I wanted to change my mind about leaving, but mother had the trip planned, packed my bags and escorted me to the bus station. I guess I kissed her when I got on the bus. I know that she did not kiss me--I can't remember mother ever really kissing me, aside from a peck on the cheek.

I was welcomed to San Francisco with open arms. I got a job with the Southern Pacific Railroad and soon felt at home. I also started to study dancing and began performing almost immediately. I worked very hard at dancing and soon gave up my job with the railroad. I did a lot of performing and had many wonderful friends. After my second Christmas in San Francisco I decided I wanted to go to New York City. I called mother collect and told her that the GI Bill would take care of my training and give me \$52.00 a month, but I would need more than that. "Well, I didn't finish your college so I will send you \$15.00 a week," mother offered. One thing that I must say about mother was that she never denied me money if she had it. She did ask me not to tell my brothers. That \$15.00 plus the GI Bill and what I had saved in San Francisco got me through until the next winter, when I had to ask mother for money to buy a winter coat. She sent me the money for the coat, but even though I went without food sometimes, I would not ask for more.

Eventually I began to get dancing jobs and I was very proud of becoming self-sufficient. I wrote mother in detail about what I was doing. I even called her to tell her when I was going to be on TV. I waited and waited for her to write and tell me she saw the show. I didn't hear until I went home on a visit. A neighbor was visiting mother and said to me, "Didn't I see you on The John Conte Show?"

"Yes that was me." I was excited that she had seen the show.

She turned to my mother with a big smile, "I told you, Hattie. That was Gus."

"Well, it didn't look like him and he was wearing very little," mother replied. She was right; I had on a Tarzan-like loincloth. Damn it, I had a great body, why not show it off? I was well covered, because at that time the censors were very careful about what went on the air. I was the choreographer for The Arlene Francis Home Show. Again mother never told me if she ever watched.

Mother and her sisters, Aunt Oma and Aunt Vivan, were as different as they could be, and yet so close that they talked to each other every day, sometimes more. Mother was a procrastinator and was envious of women who rose above the crowd. She didn't like Eleanor Roosevelt because she was out front working for things that my mother wanted to do, but that would require her to get off the couch.

A few years ago I was visiting with my aunts and they were surprised that I had done so much. "You mean mother never told you I was on television?"

Their answer was, "No!"

"But you talked to my mother every day of your lives, didn't you?"

"Yes! Isn't it funny that Hattie never said anything about it." Aunt Vivan seemed perplexed.

I am sure my aunts were surprised by all of this because, if they had known, it would have been all over Oklahoma City. I still wonder why mother wouldn't have told them, knowing how close they were. Could she have been ashamed of me or didn't want anyone to know I was doing well in the big city?

Mother had a major stroke that left her blind and unable to speak clearly. This concerned me very much I couldn't imagine this big strong lady being incapacitated. I knew at that moment I would never have anyone to turn to for help. I grew up over night. I talked my cousins, James and Lou Antonio, who were in New York seeking fame and fortune and doing very well, to go back to Oklahoma City with me. The three of us decided to drive in James's car to Oklahoma and they could visit with their family at the same time. We drove straight through without stopping except for gas and food. While one would sleep, the others would drive, that way we each took turns at the wheel. I stopped at their house first so I could bathe and dress; I was very dirty and wanted to be perfect for mother. I had no idea what to expect when I saw her, taken aback by what I saw is putting it mildly. She had lost so much weight that she was half her size, and her gray hair was pulled back in a braid. I threw my arms around her and held her for some time, tears running down my cheeks, "Mother, I stopped off at the Antonios' so I could be fresh for you."

"Why bother. I can't see you anyway," she mumbled. She could move her arms, but they didn't go around me.

Knowing Dee and Plato would not take care of her, I was willing to stay and help her back to health. My doctor in New York had given me some exercises to get some of her mobility back and I was giving her speech lessons. Because I had had a speech impediment as a child, I was given lessons for years, so I knew what I was doing. I gave her exercises to train her coordination, and she was improving. She could write her name, and say yellow, window and many more words clearly. Since mother and I never had a mother-and-son relationship, she accepted my authority as if I was an outsider. The only time we had a problem was when I was asked to stay with her until her caretaker came. She needed to use the potty and I had trouble with the wheel chair. She slapped my hand away and fixed it herself. "Listen lady, if you can do it by yourself then don't ask me for help." I would have said it that way if she had be well.

When her doctor heard that I was training her, he told my aunts to get me back to New York or I would kill her. My response to that was, "She is already dead ." They couldn't get me out of town fast enough. Before I left I arranged to have a speech therapist come in to help, but again the doctor said no. My doctor in New York couldn't believe how backward they were in Oklahoma. Many years later, Aunt Oma told me that they wished that they had listened to me.

Mother lived almost fifteen years in that condition. I was encouraged not to visit because the anticipation of my arrival would put her into a frenzy. I wrote to her weekly and Aunt Oma would write me and keep me up on the news of mother and the family. One letter told me of the love affair between mother and Plato. She even asked mother why she never spoke of me, and mother answered, "I never had to worry about him. He didn't need anyone to help him." To Aunt Oma, that was a compliment to be passed on. To me, I felt I was being punished for being good. I became closer to Aunt Oma and she was the only member of the family to see me dance. Mother wouldn't turn on the television, but Aunt Oma flew to New York to see me perform. Maybe I had the wrong mother.

I think it took Dr. Glazer to make me aware of the unrequited love I had for mother, and how I always made excuses for her actions. Do I feel better about the relationship now? Yes! I will say I have let it go.