



BETSY R. ROSENTHAL

15 MINUTES

Wow! Isn't it strange how Mom got smart all of a sudden?

My schoolteacher mother was totally inadequate when I was a child. She tried to help me with my homework, but it was no use. She knew too little.

She didn't even know how to make a salami sandwich correctly, never putting the right amount of mustard on, not slicing properly. And when replacing the knickknacks on my shelf after dusting, she always got it wrong. She could never put them back in the right order.

When I was young, my mother tried to advise me in all manner of things, including getting along with my older brother, sharing my possessions, completing my homework and interacting with other people. Didn't she know how futile it was to advise me? Her advice was always wrong.

My mother stumbled over her words and was a poor listener. She could never repeat back to me exactly what I had just told her. Worse yet, she had no conception of fashion and hadn't an inkling of what the important issues of life were. She was forever buying all the wrong clothes for me, one fashion trend too late.

When I became a teen-ager she knew even less. She talked to me about safety, about college, about boyfriends and about our religion. Why did she bother? What did she know about these subjects that I didn't already know?

Not only did my mother not know anything, she also managed to embarrass me regularly in front of other people with her lack of savvy. She used to ask my friends all sorts of questions about themselves when they came over to visit. She just didn't know anything about appropriate social behavior. I, on the other hand, knew everything.

My mom acceded to all my father's demands. She was a "yes, dear" wife. I resented her lack of leadership. Sure, she was the president of the PTA, but it was not as if she had taken charge of anything important. Why couldn't she show my father who was the boss? Yes, she mildly expressed her opinions, but she was inevitably wrong. I, on the other hand, was always right.

My mother has changed. Somewhere along the course of years she has learned things. Even, I dare say, becoming wise. Where did that strength and spirit come from? While she still may say, "yes, dear," it is perfectly clear who pulls the strings in that marriage.

She knows so much now that I seek her advice on important issues like child rearing and getting along with my mother-in-law. Now mired in the sibling warfare of my own offspring, I asked her recently, "How did you deal with the constant battles between my brother and me when we were small?" And I often call her with a "how to" question, like when I was about to prepare my first turkey. The amazing thing is that I actually follow her advice and respect her opinions.

I have no idea when she acquired all this knowledge, but clearly, she knows something. A lot, in fact. And I, on the other hand, a mother of three children, now know oh so very little.

Betsy R. Rosenthal is a former lawyer and current free-lance writer who lives in Pacific Palisades.