

I MUST'VE DONE SOMETHING RIGHT

My daughter has strengths that far outstrip mine and I'm in awe of the person she turned out to be

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The first time I realized that my daughter was actually mothering me, she was all of 7 years old. We were at a summer pool party thrown by my ad agency's creative director—a mom herself, who loved kids. She was swimming with my daughter Lillie, who was playfully splashing her.

"Take it easy," I called to Lillie. "That's my boss!"

My daughter stopped and turned to me. "You mean she could fire you?" she asked loudly, prompting an uncomfortable silence. In a flash, I realized how affected she must have been by seeing me go through several traumatic layoffs when she was still in nursery school.

"Um, yes, she could," I finally replied.

What happened next astounds me to this day. "If you fire my mom," my little girl said to my boss, "I'll kill you!"

She wasn't kidding. My feisty, determined child had taken it upon herself to prevent me from losing a job again. My boss and I laughed it off. A year later, I did lose that job, but only after the boss had herself been pushed out.

When I gave birth to my daughter at 40, after years of infertility, my joy was tempered with worry. I fretted that my baby might take after me, and not in a good way. I wasn't sure I could do a good enough job raising her.

While she has indeed inherited some of my worst traits, like a near-operatic level of anxiety, that day at the pool illustrated that she had strengths that far outstripped mine. Some moms of older daughters might secretly feel jealous because their offspring is prettier or slimmer. I feel inferior to my daughter because she's a nicer and braver person, one who is able to approach life with more equanimity.

"Mom," she'll say when I lose my temper, "you're upset right now. Let's talk about this later, after you calm down." In many ways, Lillie is much better equipped as a mother than I am. Whether that's because of her innate goodness or because I was able to give her what she needed, I'm in awe of the person she turned out to be.

I grew up with a mother who at 15 had to take over raising her 4 younger siblings after her beloved mother died—then had her own experience of parenthood darkened by giving birth to my severely disabled brother, the third of her 4 children. I was 18 months old. My mother's devastation might well have hampered her bonding with me, damaging my sense of security and confidence. She was tense and distracted and we weren't close. I became the kind of kid who got stomachaches and would run and hide from conflict.

In contrast, Lillie is fearless. A few years after her run-in with my boss, our family went kayaking while we were on vacation in the Catskills. My husband, a type 1 diabetic, had a sudden episode of low blood sugar, stumbled reaching for his medical supplies and overturned his boat. Shivering with cold, weak and mentally foggy, he couldn't right his waterlogged craft. Luckily, we were in a shallow cove so he could stand, but the shoreline was rocky and we were far from the dock.

I immediately panicked. "I'm rowing back to get help," I yelled at him, though I knew it would take me at least half an hour and he could possibly lose consciousness before then.

"No, Mom, I can help him," Lillie, who was now 11, said. She started to coach him to push his boat up onto the rocks nearby. "C'mon, Dad, I know you can do this," she said. "Just a little bit more." Lillie maneuvered her own boat onto the rocks next to his, hopped out and said like the camp counselor she would soon become, "Great job, Dad, give me a hug!"

She fed her dad candy and helped bail out his boat, and we all paddled slowly to shore. Those steep fees for summer camp starting when she was 8 had been worth it. I was relieved and grateful—but also ashamed—that she could do what I could not.

On some level, I suppose it's natural to feel outdone by your child who, in a way, is your replacement. My husband tries to comfort me when I get too down on myself. "She's a terrific kid; you're her mom and she loves you to pieces," he says. "You must have done something right."

I guess he has a point. Lillie is an adored only child who never had to give up her starring role in our family life, and it makes a certain amount of sense that she turned out the way she did. From my mother, to me, to my daughter, there's a nice progression.

And though she's ahead of me in certain respects, I'm gratified that at 23, Lillie will still turn to me for guidance. Not long ago, she sent me one of her freaked-out texts: "Mom—can you die from eating undercooked pasta?" I was happy to assure her she could not.