

I am an aunt, a great aunt, and a great, great aunt. This remarkable list of titles led me to think about aunts in general and my own aunts in particular. My aunt philosophy is this: I can say to my nieces and nephews of whatever generation things that their parents and grandparents dare not utter. I am an aunt. We have privileges.

My aunts, though, never used this privilege. I don't remember them saying anything that my own parents would have avoided. But, then, I didn't really have a large group of blood-related aunts.

I had lots of aunts-by-marriage, the wives of my uncles. My mother had eight brothers and no sisters, so there were no aunts there to whom I was related by blood. On my father's side, there were six aunts-by-marriage, and there were four aunts that were my dad's sisters, but two of them had died long before I was born.

Even aunt-names, at least in my family, seem unique. There are no duplicates among the seventeen women who, if all had survived that long, would have been my aunts of one kind or the other. I love saying their names. On my mother's side were Elizabeth, Edna, Berneita, Estella, Alice, Inez, Ardath, and Kay. And my dad's sisters and the wives of his brothers were Nellie, Elsie, Mabel, Ellen, Myrtle, Hilda, Constance, Josephine, and Maxine. And none of them, as far as I could ever tell, were alike any more than their names were.

The aunts I knew, the ones that were my blood relatives, were Hilda Bernice and Constance Marie. Both lived in Michigan, but not in our immediate locality. They visited often, sometimes coming to stay a week or so at the old home place where we lived. And, to my sister and me, their visits were a treat.

By the time I knew Aunt Hilda, she had gray hair. This was in the days when older women often rinsed their hair with something that gave it a bluish cast, and I think Aunt Hilda did that. And I never saw her in anything but a dress. There were pictures of her ice skating in snow pants, and I believe when she and her husband drove to California long before there was a paved road across the country there were pictures of her on that trip in jodhpur-like pants. But, during my growing-up years, I only saw her in dresses. Usually, they were dresses she had sewn herself, often pretty prints. She was an accomplished seamstress, a gardener, a businesswoman, and a wonderful cook. She introduced Parker House rolls to the family and made extraordinarily delicious lemon

pie. She and her husband had a dry cleaning business. One former employee told us that “Hilda was the brains of the outfit,” that I took to mean that she ran the business end of the enterprise. She always seemed to me to be “ladylike.” She usually wore black pumps with just a bit of a heel, and I remember trying them on while snooping in her room during one of her visits. I was perhaps six or seven at the time, so I suppose I could be excused for my nosiness. She sometimes brought us dress-up clothes she had gotten at her church rummage sale.

I remember Aunt Constance as brown haired for years before her hair turned gray. And her usual summer outfit was a sleeveless cotton blouse—made by her—and a print skirt or culotte, also a product of her sewing machine. My sister and I often marveled that when she was eighty, a young teenager would not have seemed out of place in one of Aunt Connie’s outfits. She was an outdoorsy person who had lots of flowers, and whose sewing machine and knitting needles were seldom quiet. I think she taught both my sister and me to knit.

She made me a dress when I entered kindergarten, but even better, she once gave my mother material for dresses for both my sister and me. And, mine became my very favorite dress. I was maybe four at the time, and there is a picture of my maternal grandmother and me that shows the dress. That dress had a red background and was printed with buttons of many colors and sizes, I don’t know if it was that pretty cloth or the pattern my mother used, but that was my favorite dress of all time. What intrigued me most about that dress was the ruffle around the hem, a wide, impressive ruffle that set off the otherwise plain, button-up-the-back, puffed sleeve little girl’s dress.

I think of Aunt Hilda and Aunt Constance time and time again, though it has been many years since they were alive. And the little memories keep them alive—like the time that Aunt Connie, on a hot Memorial Day in the cemetery, stepped behind a tree and removed her slip from under her dress to cool off a bit. Or Aunt Hilda’s perfect penmanship, her writing I could identify to this day if I saw it again.

My aunts-by-marriage I usually think of in order of where they lived, at least the ones who spent most of their lives in this neighborhood where we live. Aunt Ellen lived at the end of the road. She was the “elegant aunt” who used candles on her table,

dressed stylishly, yet was a hard worker who was also an outdoors person who taught many of us to swim. Aunt Mabel was on the same road, but closer by. She had no children, but we always liked to go to her house, because she usually passed the candy dish. We knew she was devoted to the sheep flock she and Uncle Albert raised to support themselves, and they were never far from her mind. On our road but farther east were the other two aunts-by-marriage on the Erickson side of the family. Aunt Josephine was a little woman with red hair. She was known to get on her skis and come over when the winter grew stormy and cold. Across the road from her house lived Aunt Maxine, who grew the best garden in the family, probably because of good training from her mother, also an excellent gardener.

All these aunts and my mother seemed to get along well, and all belonged to a neighborhood group of women called the Volunteer Club. Far away in Ohio was Aunt Myrtle. She and Uncle John also came often to visit, and we loved when Aunt Myrtle arrived. She always brought cakes or other treats, and she also would sit and color with my sister and me. There was usually a card game in the evening when Uncle John and Aunt Myrtle were visiting, and she could be heard sharply admonishing her husband, "Jack, quit cheating!"

People choose whether or not to become parents, but "auntdom" is not a choice, and for us aunts, it opens the doors to a wealth of possibilities. We can ignore nieces and nephews, if we wish, but, usually, it is much more appealing to use our extralegal status to give them plenty of advice, ask them for help now and then, and speak our views on any and all topics with none of the trepidation that parents sometimes have. After all, we have no control over them, and they have none over us. Sometimes, we can even be friends.