LESSONS

BY: MICHELLE P. HEATHERTON

I could discuss anything with Mom; I still can. It seems as if we've been having one endless conversation since I was about eight months old. I used to follow her around the house like a baby duck, asking her millions of questions about everything imaginable. Unlike the "teachers" at school, Mom didn't hesitate to explain complex ideas and concepts that children weren't supposed to understand. She never discouraged me from asking questions or from voicing my opinions. She never *told* me how to think; she *advised* me and gave me the essential tools to form independent thoughts.

Every so often, my mom shared her childhood stories and experiences with me. She and her three sisters grew up during the Depression, and the family lived in various neighborhoods throughout Cincinnati. Her dad, a cement contractor by trade, had to work in factories to support his family because his fledgling business was failing. Working eighteen hours a day in a factory is exhausting for anyone, especially for someone who is not well. Even though he was only in his late twenties, he was already suffering from systemic lupus--an auto-immune disease of the connective tissues that is ultimately fatal. It can be best described as a slow death. He experienced periodic attacks of the disease; when he became too sick to work, he would lose his current job and have to look for yet another one. This is one of the reasons why my mom's family moved around so frequently.

During the Depression, there were poor people and *very* poor people. I suppose my mom's family would fall into the latter category; her lunches often consisted of one piece of bread, if she was lucky. Many times, she and her sisters would go to bed early because there was nothing to eat

for supper. When they went to school, they were ridiculed because their tattered clothes hung on their gaunt bodies, and the soles of their shoes were held on with rubber bands.

They were ridiculed for another reason, *too--they were Irish.* Her family lived in rented homes and apartments in Oakley, Walnut Hills, Avondale, St. Bernard, and Mt. Adams (when it was a poor Irish community). They were welcomed only in Mt. Adams; everywhere else, they were considered outsiders because each area was divided into ethnic clusters of different nationalities. In the various neighborhoods of Italians, Jews, and Germans, the kids would shout at them, *Dirty Irish! Dirty Irish!*

I asked my mom why the other kids thought that Irish people were dirty; she told me that many of the immigrants who came to America during Ireland's Potato Famine (1845-47) had been quarantined on their boats because some of them had typhoid fever. By the time they were allowed to leave the ships, a great percentage of Irish immigrants had already perished. Since typhoid fever is spread by drinking contaminated water, she figured that the "dirty Irish" phrase had originated with the infamous epidemic and had been passed down through the generations.

"Didn't they know that it was the water that was dirty, and not the Irish people?" I inquired.

"Oh, Honey, they didn't care to make any sense out of the situation. They just used it as an excuse to say something nasty about people who were different from them."

"But your family wasn't on those boats. Why did they call *you* that?" "Because they knew we were Irish, and they grouped us all together."

My mom's experiences with prejudice made a big impression on me. I couldn't understand why some people would be so cruel and insulting to others just because of their nationality; it didn't make sense. Our discussion helped me realize that *anyone* could be a victim of criticism or ridicule. Discrimination wasn't something far removed that only remote strangers experienced. It could happen to any of us.