

Chapter One — A Labor Of Love

“She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come.”

— Proverbs 31:25

To my daughter Amanda Raquel, my beloved little lamb.

Dear Amanda,

When I was about to have you in my life, I did not know that I would have a girl. Back then, ultrasounds were performed only if the mother had health issues with her pregnancy. However, when I was five months pregnant, your father bought some items for a little girl. He bought a picture with pastel colors that featured ballet slippers, a flute, pink-colored hairclips, and lace. I did not then and have never had pastel colors in my house, so I knew the picture was not for me. When I asked your dad who the picture was for, he replied that it was for Amanda, very matter-of-factly.

Days later, when I could not come across any girl named Amanda, I asked your dad, “WHO is Amanda?” I was unaware that it was the name he had given to the baby I was carrying. It was you, Amanda! Amanda means beloved, and it is the name your dad gave you. He happened to just know that we were about to have a girl, which was a connection he began with you long before you were born.

From the moment you were born, you have been one powerful force — a force that was more than anything I could handle. You were born singing opera. You had a voice of your own, and I prayed that you would learn to use your voice for good. Your presence caused me to realize that many of the things I had learned in my life were unhealthy, unhelpful, and untrue. I realized I had to unlearn many things from my past. Among other things, I had to unlearn the idea that a good girl is supposed to remain quiet. You were the joy that allowed me to see myself differently. Your precious existence managed to bring out the best within me.

“But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.”

— 1 Corinthians 15:10

Even when you were just a girl, you had all the personality traits of a leader. You were influential and in touch with your emotions. I remember you leading a group of first-grade girls around the playground, each one hand in hand and you in front. The principal, teachers, and I all marveled at Amanda, the born leader. Many people think that a woman becomes a matriarch after retiring as a mother, but I don't see it that way.

I believe women play an important role as matriarchs in a family, whether a mother or not, long before their retirement years. For example, Mother Teresa was a matriarch within the Catholic Church for decades, even though she was never a mother biologically!

A woman's life has long been divided into three traditional periods, the maiden, the mother, and the matriarch. The maiden has lost her standing in our society with time, making motherhood the dominant period. Society has somehow made motherhood a woman's primary identity. Moreover, some see a matriarch as a woman who no longer has any kin to take care of, someone who has nothing better to do with her time than pursue her interests, has power and is revered by her family.

I reject this division and the role of a matriarch. From my experience, an effective matriarch is a woman who is the head of a family or tribe. She is a leader and a faithful steward of her family. As a Christian, for example, I picture the Holy Spirit as the matriarch of the Holy Trinity.

I may be stepping on some toes with that notion! In Christianity, we are taught much about God the Father, the patriarch, and God the Son, but we are not taught much about the Holy Spirit. If God is our Heavenly Father, and Jesus is the son of God, it makes sense to me that the Holy Spirit is our Heavenly Mother, the Matriarch of the Godhead, the Holy Trinity. I believe the Holy Spirit is a great place to begin learning about the role of a matriarch. I will elaborate on this concept further in the coming chapters.

The way I see you, Amanda, you're a diamond with many facets, each of which I have tried to inspire. Controlling you was never an option. I knew you were a matriarch-in-the-making when I saw you contributing to your community and family without experiencing motherhood. My vision for you expanded, and I saw you as a woman of favor with influence over people in your sphere.

Amanda, I am writing this book in the hopes of reminding you that every facet of you matters. You could always persuade others through your wisdom, convictions, and kindness, with your inner beauty, your outward beauty, and your ability to love, so it wasn't far-fetched for me to see you as a leader. I see you as someone who nurses her interests and prioritizes self-care with a healthy balance of care for others. A matriarch is someone who sees value in her presence and sees value in others.

I believe the unbreakable bond of love I have for you as a mother is partly because I missed sharing such a bond with my own mother. My mom was still alive when I was a child, but her mental illness caused her to be away from home for long periods and did little to help us connect as a mother and daughter. I knew very well what it was like for a girl not to have her mother around. Some days, every room of the house was filled with

a cold, dark cloud. I remember always feeling hungry, intensely lonely, and on the verge of crying. I did not want that for you.

“You are better off without me,” your grandmother stated many times. I could only wonder in silence why she would say that because there was no way I wanted to be away from my mother, especially as a very young child. Her presence shrouded me with warmth and comfort.

While my mom lacked confidence as a mother, she made up for it with a deep, unconditional love over the years to come, but she was so destroyed from within that she actually believed her children were better off without her. Perhaps her emotions had been battered by the old teachings of motherhood so much that she stopped believing in herself. She stopped trusting in the power of her love.

(Note: this passage on a mother believing her child may be better off without her is not intended to take away from the deep love a mother must have in order to give her child away for adoption. Adoption is a very different topic from that of a mother not trusting in the power of her love. I would argue that giving a child up for adoption in most cases requires a superior, supernatural love.)

There were many times that I made a mental note to myself: “Don’t let your mind play tricks on you, Carol. When you have your own children someday, there may be times when you FEEL as though they would be better off without you. Do not give in to those thoughts. These thoughts are not true. Do NOT let your mind play tricks on you.”

I must confess that there were times when I was exhausted or frustrated for extended periods. Sure enough, those thoughts would creep in. But I anticipated that and was prepared. I used those moments to ask for help, to take time to attend a retreat or go out dancing with my girlfriends. Once rested and refreshed, my mind was no longer vulnerable to the lies. Don’t let your mind play tricks on you, Amanda.

To your grandmother, being a good mother meant slaving her life away for her husband and her children. She had four kids while being married to my father. My dad was a truck driver in the early years and was gone for extended periods. My mom cared for her children all day and scoured the house to perfection all night.

It was much more than my mom could handle, but she didn’t have the liberty to say so, the liberty to express her opinions, or the liberty to have a problem-solving discussion with my father without being criticized. Self-care, balance, and boundaries were not words in our household when I grew up.

Amanda, understand that your voice matters and, if used wisely, it can solve a lot of your problems as well as problems for others. A true matriarch is willing to be humble, learn, and lead. A true matriarch never borrows someone else’s voice to exercise her

command. She says what she believes to be true and doesn't give in to social pressure to be silent.

I believe one of the reasons I was able to grow into the role of a matriarch is that I had the wisdom to unlearn many of the things I'd been taught while growing up. As I mentioned, my mother was sick for much of my childhood. She spent many days in hospitals, away from home. When I was fourteen, I lived with my grandparents temporarily, and by the time I was sixteen, my maternal grandparents became my legal guardians.

My grandmother, Grandma Jean, taught me faith, unconditional love, and self-care. Grandma Jean supplied massive squishy hugs communicating to each child that they were her favorite. I learned that it was okay to enjoy the mysteries of life, that I didn't have to figure everything out, and it was okay to make mistakes so long as I learned from them. I learned that I didn't have to be perfect to be loved.

That bond of love with my grandmother taught me that I hurt her when I did things to hurt myself. When I did things to bring joy into my life, my grandmother shared that joy. That invisible connection was powerful. My grandmother taught me how to fight for my family when necessary. Frankly, if it wasn't for my grandmother, your mother, as you know me, would not even be here today; I would be a very different person if I had survived at all.

Being devalued is a form of abuse that tends to erode the good in a person. Never allow yourself to be a victim of such abuse, Amanda. We all have value and purpose in this life — a daughter, a sister, a friend, a nurse. Each of these facets have joined together to form you, the sparkling multi-faceted diamond of **you!**

Every aspect of you is important. You have always been headstrong, vocal, kind, affectionate, and loving, and as I watched you grow up, I did my best to help each of those qualities flourish. You are loved, my dear.

You matter — your impact on the world matters. Wherever the twists and turns of this life take you, always hold on to those truths.

“Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for your God is with you wherever you go.”

— **Joshua 1:9**

Remember what you do to yourself, you do to me also, for I can feel the pain you feel, and I enjoy the joy you adhere to. This is how strong of a bond we share. Besides the emotional bond that families and loved ones share, there is also an invisible, physical

bond that, although microscopic, exists. I suspect this is why when a loved one dies, our hearts can feel physical pain. We cry because that physical bond is severed. It was this bond between my children and myself that I held MOST dear while you and your brothers were growing up.

Remember the couple of months during which we lost touch with one another while you were in college the first time around? You were in a relationship that was ... I'll just say less than heavenly. Those months while we were not in contact were torture for me, but I never gave up on our bond. The bond between us was very important to me.

When you were growing up, I believed with all my heart that the invisible connection between us was literally the difference between life and death. I believed our bond had to be nourished, cherished, strengthened, and prayed for.

I believed that bond would get us through the tough teenage years and beyond. I believed that if anything did pull us apart, I could tug on those heartstrings and that strong connection would draw us back together.

"His banner over me is love."

— Song of Solomon 2:4

I trust that one of the reasons you were able to outgrow and break away from that relationship is the strong connection you and I shared. I am so glad our bond protected us from the worst that could have happened. Countless women are often unable to escape from toxic, controlling, dangerous, or even life-threatening relationships once they've been isolated from family and friends. The guy you were dating at the time intercepted my phone calls to you. He told me that he'd make sure I'd never see you again and that I would never see my grandchildren! I was unable to connect with you to inform you of what was happening.

I prayed harder, and I held onto our bond with renowned fervor. I reminded myself that you are SMART! I am glad you worked hard to figure out what was happening in that relationship, and you grew. You got smarter and wiser and came back to yourself. You found your voice again. You overcame a far too common obstacle for many women.

I am very proud of you for that and so very grateful to God for His help. Growing pains can be, well, painful. Yet, you got yourself to a better place despite the confusion and heartache at the time.

"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well."

— Psalm 139:14

Amanda, I hope you find this book useful throughout your life journey as you pave your way to becoming a family matriarch. Through these letters, I have offered my thoughts on the significance of family leadership. I have attempted to share some important themes that I believe are essential to the role of a family matriarch, such as being a repairer of the breach and having faith in the power of love.

Each chapter of this book elaborates further on a concept that I believe to be vital in helping you become a leader like none other. I've shared my thoughts on the power of faith and family and the importance of good stewardship and crisis management. I hope that I have succeeded in penning down a framework upon which you can build that utilizes the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit as a source of virtues and values.

I hope to effectively communicate how much you matter, how much your heritage matters, and how much your voice matters.

Above all, I hope you can grasp the profound love that I have for you and all of the love and joy that God has in store for you. You have a wonderful life ahead of you. I am so proud of you, Amanda, my beloved little lamb. I love you with all my heart! I am excited to see where your life takes you and where you lead our family.

For all other Amandas out there, know that you matter, your faith matters, your heritage, your dreams, and your voice matters. Above all, know that you are greatly loved!

She is the chalk that draws the line

The sturdy rope, the ties that bind

The go-to when times are rough

The sweetness in the breath of love.

— Mike Hauser

Love,

Your mother,

Carol

Reflection & Conversation Starter

Who has shown you unconditional love in your life?

How has that love impacted the path of your life?
