

NDR 47 author COMMENTARY on  
'did your mother ask *who do you think you are?*'

Mary Gilliland

I was made into such a good girl that I had no answer for the question at the time.

My poems age 6 to 10 rhymed and metered the small joys of family life as the household accumulated tinder that would later crash and burn around us. I am of the Roman Catholic generation brought up on hellfire punishment for sins we were unaware of and a cardboard box on the teacher's desk with a slot for our pennies for the missions.

In my thirties as a member of a group doing transactional analysis, I learned that phrases my parents commonly shouted at their children in frustration or anger were injunctions that disrupted the natural flow and connection between thought, feeling, action.

My reticent father would blurt *You're defiant!* in a tone mixed of shaming and admiration. His accusation placed me in a position just this side of sinning, a precarious culpability from which no argument was possible. He might well have been mouthing his own father, and a lineage of early onset mental illness and alcoholism.

My mother, with children all day in a household that grew with the regularity of Irish twins, was more inventive and more caustic. During the transactional therapy I kept a notebook that started with the disclaimer, in case I died first, that the contents would not apply to her present person or her beliefs, which in her fifties transformed in more positive ways than any other person I have ever known.

But in my childhood and adolescence, she leveled an array of pithy phrases at her children, sometimes while swinging the belt. (What did I answer to the poem's eponymous question? Was I mute? did I scream back 'I am myself'? did I dare sarcasm--'oh haven't you heard? I'm Mary Gilliland'--which would have or did make everything worse at that moment. *Don't you answer me back* was a phrase that she used at other times.)

One consequence of my parents' childrearing methods is a frequent delay in my response, whatever the circumstance; it can take me 'forever' to think of what to say.

These reflections arise long after the fact of the poem. What was in my mind when I wrote it, despite the sorry circumstances of her utterance, was the gift that my mother's question had become once I felt free to answer truthfully, to know my own mind.

When her spirits were less stressed, my mother's sayings were often cribbed from her German father, such as my being *Slower than molasses uphill in winter!* I am. Taking one's time can reveal much more than the sum of the parts.

I have always loved riddles, particularly those from the Anglo-Saxon. I've had years of Zen training with modern koans, of Vajrayana visualization and dissolution. I can sift the items in this list poem into 2 categories:

-what have I always loved? just-frozen ice on a stream or a pool,  
flowering plants, apples - our archetypal fruit, pilgrimage, paper;

-what have I coped with enough to learn to make my own? tools,  
deadlines, concussions and falling.

Those 2 questions, more than the specific answers, are who I think I am.