

## NEGOTIATING ADOLESCENCE

The phone rang. It was my daughter, Barbara, calling to ask if she could spend the night. Her apartment had been painted that day and the stench was driving her crazy.

“Sure,” I said, “Come on over. Maggie (the dog) and I would love to see you.”

I held my breath. Hopefully we’d have a nice night together.

I’d like to think of Barbara as grown-up..... she is 25 but she is not. She is still very much a teenager, head-strong and temperamental. She knows everything and doesn’t want any help or input from anyone, especially her mother.

I joke that Barbara is my porcupine girl. Not so funny really. The get-away-from-me quills spike out of her body without a word being spoken.

As it turned out, the evening went well. I was glad.

The next morning she came downstairs, dressed for work, to ask if what she was wearing looked okay.

I took a look. No, it really didn’t look okay. It needed a different shirt. Barb already knew this which was why she was asking me in the first place but she was running late for work and hoping I’d think it was good enough, and she’d just wear it and go.

*Ohmigosh. What do I say?* She’d only brought a few items of clothing with her.

I decided to tell her truthfully what I thought—the shirt was the problem--and to offer to let her borrow one of mine.

So we stood in the kitchen and discussed the shirt. Iron it? Tuck it in? Wear it out? Roll up the sleeves? I could see she was getting more and more upset by the second.

She stomped out and went back upstairs to fish through my closet. I followed her, making helpful suggestions. Or maybe not so helpful because she turned to me, half-naked and with that

I'm-gonna-do-it-my-way energy that I hate, barked, "Don't say another word. I don't want your help. Leave me alone."

*Stop. Think. Try HARD not to lose it. Recognize that your child is having a problem and control yourself. Do not add to her upset by your own need to help her and fix it. You should have known better than to follow her upstairs in the first place. Breathe.*

I went downstairs.

In a few minutes, Barbara reappeared, wearing a different shirt, handbag over her shoulder, ready to go. She came down the stairs and made a hairpin turn, heading directly for the front door, so that I couldn't see what the shirt looked like with the rest of the outfit. Out she went, slamming the door behind her. I heard the car door slam and the engine start.

Not two minutes later the phone rang.

"Good-bye, Mom. Have a good day. Thanks for letting me spend the night." All said in the sweetest voice imaginable!

So what's up with that? Here's what I think. Barbara knew that her behavior was inappropriate but she couldn't contain her anxiety well enough to control herself. So she acted out and then felt remorseful and wanted to fix it but was not yet mature enough to be able to take responsibility for her actions and just apologize.

It's a hard thing to do, to contain yourself and behave appropriately when you feel overwhelmingly anxious. Just like me following Barbara upstairs into my closet, how hard I struggled to contain myself. That is the work at any age or level of development.

Barbara is the youngest of my 3 daughters, almost all raised and out of the nest by now. And it is sometimes too easy for me to go to the place where I remember the good parts and drop out the on-going struggle of the small, and sometimes not so small, annoyances that made daily

life challenging. This was a good reminder. It keeps the experience of raising children fresh and alive and keeps me in the trenches.

And so the next time a mother or father describes to me his/her pain and frustration with the on-going trials of parenting, I will nod knowingly and humbly, with true empathy in my heart.