

Without a doubt, my mother, Phyllis Griffin Wood, was my most influential teacher. She taught mostly through example, but would teach directly when necessary. Her lessons stay in my mind to this day.

One of her best lessons was not to whine. It's not as if my mother didn't have reason to moan and complain about her life. Here are a few of the things that happened to her in her life:

- She lost two sisters and a daughter to cancer;
- She caught her first husband cheating on her;
- A doctor told her she could not have children. She went on to have four, and took the first one back to that doctor to show him he was wrong.
- One of the great loves of her life was killed in a military aircraft crash;
- Her second husband was an alcoholic;
- She lost her second husband unexpectedly and was left with four children, ages 10-16, to raise
- She raised a granddaughter until she was no longer physically able to do so.

So, she went on with her life despite the horrible things that happened to her. But she never complained about it – or at least within earshot of me. That's stuck with me to this day – don't constantly complain about your life.

There were some specific things she taught me that have saved me in many situations. One of her rules was to never throw away mail unopened. “It might have a check in it,” she said.

Once, after being in an auto accident, I turned it over to my insurance company and forgot about it. A letter arrived in the mail that looked suspiciously like junk mail. I let it stay unopened for several days, until finally my wife, Cheryl, told me to do something with it. Following my mom's advice, I opened it and found an insurance settlement check.

She believed in proper fitting of shoes. She took us to an old-fashioned (by today's standards) shoe store where the owner did the fitting. She also believed in buying good quality shoes, even if it stretched the budget.

Recently, my wife was having trouble with her feet. Thinking back to my mom's practice, I suggested that she needed a new pair of shoes – and that she should buy a good pair. She did, and her foot troubles went away. I pay dearly for special diabetic footwear, but it holds up and helps take care of my feet, which is critical for a type II diabetic.

My mother often fussed about using too many paper towels. I don't have any great stories about paper towels, but I often think of my mother when pulling a few too many off of the dispenser.

I'm careful about closing up the house or car when using air conditioning. In my youth, failure to do so would bring a comment of “Are you trying to cool the entire outdoors?”

She provided resources to encourage me. When I learned how to type, she gave me a refurbished manual typewriter, on which I did many of my early writings. Not long before I went to college, she bought me an Olivetti manual typewriter, which was a nice model for the time. I used it all through college and still have it.

When my older son showed talent in playing the trombone, I moved heaven and earth to ensure that he had an instrument that was on a par with his growing ability. He went on to study trombone in college. When my younger son showed an interest in screenwriting, I bought almost any book on movies and screenwriting that he wanted. He went on to be admitted to the most selective college screenwriting program in the country. All of this came as a result of following my mother's example.

She did her best to teach us to conserve money, because it was tight in my family. But she somehow found money for special things – like the piano and piano lessons that my father objected to before he died. My brothers and sister all participated in band, and somehow we all had instruments. As a teen-ager, I wanted to be the next Jimi Hendrix, and somehow I ended up with a nice guitar.

My mother modeled dignity. She had no use for people who cried at funerals. She did not cry or draw attention to herself at her husband's or daughter's funeral. When she told me about my father's death, she was calm and collected.

She had no use for hypocrites or for people who tried to act more important than they were.

She modeled an acceptance of diversity. I took notice of her friendship with the African-American man who cleaned the bus station that we operated. Her acceptance of other races in the turbulent 1960s was not as easy as it seemed.

Even as she was winding down her life, she held to her standards. In the retirement apartment complex in which she lived for a time, she volunteered to wash dishes in the kitchen. We were later told that she was very particular about the way the dishes should be washed.

My mother's genetic influence runs in me, but more importantly, the example she set is my greatest gift from her and the reason why she was my most influential teacher.