

Spic and Span, and Other Such Blarney

By Dennis Payton Knight

In the household of my youth, if a room ever met Mom's ideal of being spic and span, it was only fleeting. With seven of us kids tracking in everything from snips and snails to puppy dog tails, and being all too careless with our sugar, spice and everything nice, it didn't take long for our spaces to quickly return to the even higher American ideal of being quite livable.

Of course spic and span is only in the eye of grandmothers and drill sergeants. The rest of us tend to live comfortably in a whole lot of other clichés. We believe in ourselves and trust our instincts, eat our vegetables and watch no pots, knowing they will never boil under surveillance. We let our consciences be our guides but seldom do we manage to follow the old man's advice to do as he said and not as he did.

Once I surveyed my family to gather some of the blarney and other truths we tend to live by. Often it is based on the hard knocks of personal experience, such as this dire warning from a nephew. "Open sauerkraut before cooking," which brings to mind pressure cookers gone awry and having to spatulate my own partly cooked dinner from the wall.

Most of the advice we follow, however, is passed through generations. Our mom remembered her mother's warning that "Whistling girls and cackling hens always come to some bad end." And my sister, when she learned to whistle got similar advice from our grandma, that same sweet little old lady saying "Whistling girls are like crowing hens." As it is, I don't recall in the intervening decades ever hearing either of them whistle, not even once.

A niece recalled how my brother, her dad, told her, "*non illigitimus carborundrum*", meaning "Don't let the bastards grind you down." That same brother, who like me is not the tallest guy in the room, has gotten through life remembering the advice of his high school football coach that it's not the size of the dog in the fight that counts, it's the size of the fight in the dog.

Mom once gave a little diary to a granddaughter with an admonition she had penciled in, "If you don't want anyone to read it, don't write it down." The warning was so taken to heart the diary remains blank to this day.

The memory of Dad's expressions is an archive I have used myself. He would glance at my plate half-finished, my fork in repose, and observe how my eyes were bigger than my belly, or tell my little brother working away at a mouth-too-full that he had bitten off more than he could chew. But often dad's comments were merely observations of daily living. We remembering him going to the window to check the gathering clouds and reporting to Mom. "Good God, Geraldine" he would say, "it looks anonymous out there."