

Ow!

*By Nancy Martz*

Risking stares from people outside the family never concerned me as I grew up, but Mama gave me plenty of frowning looks along with lots of advice that I couldn't physically follow. "Oh, no" she would say as she studied how my clothes didn't hang right on me after she had spent time at the sewing machine making school and church outfits for me.

She would sit squaw-like on the kitchen floor next to the step stool where I rotated abruptly at her command. "Stand up straight!" Her voice crackled with vexation whenever she pinned for hemming my skirts and dresses, and I was constantly afraid from the tone of her voice that she might hit me. She would get up off the floor and stare with indignation at my thin kid frame and how the dress she was shortening for me hung at a tilt. Often she whacked my left shoulder down in attempt to right me and asked me why I was always leaning. I didn't know I was standing crooked; it felt natural to me. A lot of the orders she gave me throughout my childhood were about my propensity to sit, stand, and walk poorly.

But it was no use. My clothes always had a slightly uneven hem, and still do. It bothered Mama and wore down the corners of her mouth whenever she put time into correcting me. Decades later she apologized and said, "If we had known you had scoliosis, we would have had it fixed when you were young. We just didn't know." Actually, the apology blew by me because only Mama minded the improper deployment of my ribs and backbones resulting in slightly uneven hemlines.

It didn't matter to me; it didn't hurt, and as long as I had my adrenalin shots to control my asthma, I could run fast, turn cartwheels, and climb up on the hen house, the hog house, and the corn crib like a wunderkind. I could explode with pure physical exertion, and that was joy enough for me and served me well most of my life.

And my nonchalance lasted into my seniority. Then long after I had charged through life ignoring my spine, it tweaked nerves into occasional neck, hip, and back bites and became more apparent to friends, some of whom provided advice about how I should throw my shoulders back and down, raise my chest, and breathe through my diaphragm. Not wanting to risk objectification I learned to distract from it with jackets, collars, turtle necks and scarves.

Were I superstitious, I might wonder if this developing discomfort in my senior years is pay off for my absence of suffering and disability the scoliosis could have exacted over the majority of my life. I doubt, however, that the universe is that organized or vindictive. More like the universe is itself a little tilted as it grows outward from its original BANG toward its seniority but having the best time possible before it collapses in on itself taking my scrap of wonky, misaligned stardust with it.