

TAPESTRY

S U S A N M A I L E R

A COUPLE OF MONTHS BEFORE DAD DIED, my husband and I went to Provincetown to visit him. The morning we left I went up to his bedroom to say goodbye. He looked at me with his very blue eyes and said “Susie, our family is a fine tapestry, you must take care it doesn’t unravel.” I panicked! I felt that as the oldest, he had left me the legacy of keeping the family together. On second thought, I realized or perhaps hoped, that he had meant it was a job for all of us: his nine children, Norris our stepmother for thirty years, aunt Barbara, and Peter our cousin.

I got to thinking about how this tapestry was woven and went back to the time I was three or four years old, living in Mexico with my mother. Dad would drive down with Adele, put me in the 1950’s version of a child’s seat and then drive back to New York on a voyage that took eight days. I used to take this for granted until I had children of my own and realized the amount of energy and devotion such an endeavor demanded.

Later on, as the family grew larger, he repeated this kind of emotional involvement in different ways with all his children. We would spend one month of every summer with him, usually in Maine. We were not allowed to invite friends and, as a result, we learned to be a family. Dad would coax us, sometimes bully us into activities from plays to games to sports, which not all of us appreciated. It could have been a disaster, but in spite of the grumbling and groaning that went on, we enjoyed each other’s company immensely.

As my own children were born, we traveled every year from Chile to Provincetown gathering at Dad and Norris’s home. Many times there were more than twenty of us around the dinner table; everyone speaking and laughing at once, with stories streaming up and down the room; a zany and unruly group. In twenty-five years I think that I only missed one summer.

And now ... the tapestry has a life of its own. It tightens and grows without the master's direction. Each one of us has an email list of 22 members called "family" which keeps the threads of the fabric strong and vibrant.

Most people think of Dad as a great writer. I like to think of him as a master weaver.