What I Am To Be, I Am Now Becoming

I was given these powerful words by my mother at age five. The statement wasn’t a wish or a dream for her. It was a living and breathing thought that she used to carry herself through years of adversity. Her words were a precious heirloom, handed down through her grandmother’s Scottish tongue, carried in her father’s Jamaican rum and now, hanging in the fresh Florida breeze before it kissed my young ears. I didn’t understand it then, but that single sentence held the key to my entire future.

At the time, my mother and I were raging a domestic war against my cruel and unforgiving father. Burdened by his childhood and bitter at his shortcomings, my once caring father became a merciless tyrant. His depression thundered above him everyday, and he let his misery rain down on us. Days were filled with consuming silence, and nights echoed with the sound of my father’s explosive anger drowning out my mother’s tears.

His words were deadly. “You are nothing. You are worthless. You aren’t even my daughter.” And yet, my mother still managed to bring her warm palms to my cheeks and whisper hope into my heart. “You will become something extraordinary Sheri. You are so strong. You are everything to me.” I tried hard to believe her. I studied my way through the sorrow and buried my worries in my work. Mantras formed from my misery and poems from my pain. “I am a singer. I am a scholar. I am strong.” All at once, I could hear the Highlands and taste the warm rum. I could feel my mother’s loving palms.

But it would be difficult to unbecome. My first relationships were rocky. I couldn’t find someone gentle enough to handle my glass heart, and the cracks began to show. My fractured psyche worsened as my responsibilities grew. First advanced placement classes, then intense choir sessions, then long shifts at my job.

I was becoming depressed and sleeping to escape the world outside. My father’s words began to bubble inside me. “I am nothing. I am worthless. I am just ordinary.” We don’t often realize how important words can be for our survival. The things we say can manifest mountains in our own paths. I realized that my mother’s words were more than just hopeful prayers. She had planted promises of a bright future inside me, waiting patiently for them to grow. Little did she know that I was poisoning my dreams every day.

I didn’t understand how powerful it was to believe in myself until I was sent to a mental institution. I met young people, kids younger than I who were languishing away in their own minds. One five year old child pulled his hair out because it was the only time his parents would pay attention to him. A fifteen year old girl had overdosed on pills because her parents had abandoned her. Pain begets self-sabotage and self-sabotage begets pain. I finally understood the vicious cycle I was trapped in.

I decided that I would become my mother’s words. I sang Italian arias for the children I met in the hospital. When I was released, I joined my school’s poetry club and screamed my story for Blue Apple Poetry’s Louder than a Bomb semifinals. I made it to FAU, became a Certified Student Leader, an Elite Owl Ambassador and an iLead the World speaker for our 2019 Student Conference.

I still struggle with mental illness, but mental illness is not who I am. It doesn’t have to be who you are either. You are going to be who you grow yourself to be. Don’t let anyone take your words from you. And when you need an encouraging word, remember:

“Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, None but ourselves can free our minds!

Have no fear for atomic energy, Cause none of them can stop the time.”

* Bob Marley