

# Mother Laughed

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Esther Bliss Taylor and Lloyd William Taylor were my loving and involved parents. Their unconditional love gave both me and my sister, Ruth Taylor Deery, the gift of personal security. The following story shows how a spontaneous reaction can both reveal unspoken assumptions and undercut an otherwise nearly perfect record as parent.

Sometime during my high school years (1945-1949) my parents sent me to Chicago to the Johnson O'Connor Research Foundation, which is still in business: <http://www.jocrf.org>. Their present website says their goal is "to provide people with a knowledge of their aptitudes that will help them make decisions about school and work." I went to find out what profession to choose.

I remember only one of their tests. I was told to turn over a sheet of paper; on the top was the statement. "It is suddenly discovered that people do not need to sleep. Write down what happens next." When I finished the timed test, the technician simply counted the number of words I had written; nothing else. Then he said they were sure I could do better, and there was another challenge to write extensively in a given time. They called the aptitude measured by this test "ideaphoria," meaning the spontaneous flow of ideas.

When I left Johnson O'Connor for home, they gave me a book entitled "The Too-Many-Aptitude Woman." Their theory was that if you did not use your aptitudes, it made you nervous, and at the time this was a particular problem for women. They also recommended that I should become the Chairman of The Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) or something similar. The AEC was then a recently-founded civilian commission to supervise all national non-weapon uses of nuclear energy – a big deal.

When I reported their recommendation to my mother, she laughed.

Winston Churchill's mother would not have laughed.

Mother was focused on character, with a strong Puritan flavor. She told me she prayed that I would marry a woman of good moral character, which I did – twice. Ambition – certainly ambition to act on the national stage – was never a subject of our wide-ranging family dinner conversations. Popular status – or pushing yourself forward professionally -- were implicitly treated as unworthy, but mostly just ignored.

Still, when someone you have paid to give your child advice on choosing a profession makes so lofty a proposal, it seems to me the appropriate parental response is, "Well, why not? I'm sure you can do that as well as anyone."