The First Dress

Carla Theriot

Course: Education 654
Instructor: Dr. Cynthia Elliott
Assignment: Reflection

I had seen the box in Mama's closet. Somehow it looked different than all the other boxes, mysterious, old, and special all at the same time. I never gave much thought to the white, elongated waxy-looking box all those times that I frequented Mama's closet, but even as a young child, I sensed that the box at the very top of the closet held a place of prominence on the shelf.

In the fall when I was four years old, my Mama began her preparation for my soon-to-be-born sister. I watched her tip-toe and carefully remove the box from the shelf. She motioned to me to come and peek in the box. Mama had a smile on her face as she slowly opened the box. I could not imagine what would be inside. I remember feeling tingly and excited as if something special might appear. As Mama turned the box towards me, I saw a small white dress. I was so excited, thinking that it was a dress for my newest baby doll. Yet, when I looked more closely at the dress, it didn't resemble my other doll clothes. I knew the dress was important, but I did not really understand why. Mama shared with me that the dress was very valuable to her. Looking at her "special" dress through the eyes of a child, I could not comprehend Mama's reasoning. She then told me that when she had been a tiny baby this cotton dress had been hers. It was the first she had ever worn! It was long and white and decorated with what Mama called hand embroidery. She encouraged me to touch the embroidery on the collar and on the front of the

dress. At the time, I thought that these designs called hand embroidery meant the dress was special. Later, I would realize that it was not the embroidery that Mama was talking about.

Mama went away to the hospital, and my great-grandmother Ola came to stay with me. Soon Mama brought my baby sister home from the hospital wearing the dress from the box. Great-grandmother Ola told me that I had worn the dress when I came home from the hospital. She said that was the first dress that Mama had ever worn. I told her I knew that the hand embroidery made the dress special. She told me that the hand embroidery was beautiful, but that was not why Mama loved this dress. Great-grandmother Ola then told me a story I had never heard. That beautiful white dress was so special because Mama's mother had made it for her. Ola said that Mama's mother was named Lilly. Lilly had made the dress for mama, anticipating her birth, hand embroidering the collar and the front of the dress.

Shortly after Mama's birth, Lilly became very ill. One of her last requests was that Mama be put in the lily-white dress she had made for her. Lilly saw Mama in the dress and held her close. Shortly after seeing Mama in the dress, Lilly died due to complications from giving birth. Great-grandmother Ola took care of Mama. Mama's daddy, Selby, returned to active naval duty in China because he was so upset after his wife died. Great-grandmother Ola knew how special the hand-made embroidered dress was to Lilly for her first-born child, so it was carefully preserved for posterity.

Years later, when my first child was born, Mama appeared at the hospital with the special box that held "the first dress." I watched as she lovingly dressed my daughter in the same dress that her mother, Lilly, had made for her all those years ago. Each time a grandchild was born, Mama appeared at the hospital carrying the box that held "the first dress" and would lovingly dress each new baby.

The dress is now seventy-four years old and has been worn by each of my siblings and each grandchild. There have since been ten newborns who have worn this dress, mama's four children and all six of her grandchildren. This dress has now been passed to me for safe keeping. I have come to understand that, to Mama, this dress represents a legacy of love passed down through the generations. The embroidery placed stitch-by-stitch into the white fabric represents the deep love of a mother for her child. The simple cotton dress that Lilly made has become a symbol of the love that she gave to Mama, a legacy of love that will remain in our family for all time.