modern family

in an age of upheaval, reweaving the ties that bind
I'm not sure what triggers the rush of emotions that cause me to pause to reflect on my childhood, to contemplate my life choices. I know today's introspection was sparked by the seedlight at the side door of my home.

"Mommy, why are you crying?" asked my round-faced kindergartner, excited about his first day in "big kid school."

"I'm not crying, honey, just something in my contacts."

"OK, well, don't worry, I'm gonna be a good boy. No bad words like 'poop' and 'butt.' I promise!"

"Have a good day, sweetie. Listen to your teacher and walk with your big brother and big sister, not in front of them."

He was halfway down the driveway before I finished the sentence.

The last of my five children is now in kindergarten—"traditional school." I call it a former homeschoole—and I sit to reflect on my childhood, my education, my family.

It was Detroit in the 1940s, and I was among the second generation of my family that was born in the North. My maternal grandparents picked cotton in Mississippi. They moved to Detroit in 1941 for survival and for economic opportunities as a part of history's Great Migration. My grandfather worked for Ford, while my grandmother tended the house and the children.

My grandparents had a deep commitment to family—and by "family," they meant not only blood relatives, but also the people they loved and the people who loved them. My grandfather served as the deacon of a neighborhood Baptist church. Most of the people in our neighborhood attended the church, so we spent time together at church activities. My siblings and I addressed the church members as aunts, uncles, and cousins, and they often came over to my grandparents' house, where my parents, my siblings, and I also lived, for family functions.

Our house was divided into four two-bedroom flats. At least thirty members of our extended "family" lived in one of those flats during my childhood; it often served as a landing place for people coming up from the South. When I asked my grandfather why our house had so many different people living it, he responded, "Because our family needs a place to stay until they get on their feet. It's sometimes hard to get settled. The North is different than back home. You need to take care of family. That's how God wants it."

Family was considered the source of our physical strength. God was our source of spiritual strength. Education was the source of our natural strength.

My grandparents weren't formally educated, so they were adamant about my mother and her brothers getting a good education. My grandmother was friends with all of her children's teachers; she visited the school almost daily, taking the teachers food, and called them at home when she couldn't help the kids with their homework. She even bought copies of textbooks for home use. The military was a viable alternative for my male relatives because "a man needs to see the world and learn to discipline himself," as my grandfather would say. But otherwise, higher education was non-negotiable.

Still, while my mother attended college briefly, she became frustrated with her chosen major and dropped out. She went to work at a bank. I was her firstborn, the eldest of the grandchildren, which meant the pressure for me to succeed academically was even more intense than it had been for my mother. I started reading when I was 2 years old, so my entire family considered me to be the "golden ticket," the first in the family who would blaze trails for the Price/Talbert clan. I didn't like being the "smart one" in the family, as I was always expected to help cousins with schoolwork, older family members with letters and resumes, and my siblings with whatever they needed. But I understood and accepted the role with no complaints and went on to earn a bachelor's in English and education at the University of Michigan.

As the first person in my family to graduate from college, I was given opportunities that my grandparents couldn't imagine. But being a woman and then a mother created a series of challenges that my family had not yet experienced.

Immediately after college, I married a man from the area. My decision to marry—and to have my first child shortly thereafter—infuriated my mother. She expected me to pursue a career as an educator and then a lawyer. She lived out