

My Mother

My mother is gone. As a dear friend's grandmother used to say: she is away. I like that better than gone, because my mother will never truly be gone. She was away on October 14 at 5:35 am. Thirty-nine years and two days after my father and two days before my new grandson arrived to fill the hole left by death.

I lost my mother twelve years ago, when Alzheimer's claimed her memory, took her ability to communicate and left her living in a state that seemed nightmarish to me, cruel even. I think I said good-bye to her then, when she could no longer recall my face, recognize who I was. I told my brain there would be no more calling out for my mother to have her fix things, to have her make it all better.

This past Saturday of Thanksgiving weekend, I changed my becoming a new grandmother travel plans and I chose instead to fly to my mother and take her hand while we waited for death to enter her room and wrestle with her, and to ultimately win the struggle. Sherry my sister was already at my mother's side, has always been at her side, keeping my mother's life as happy and safe as only Sherry can do.

Sherry and I waited, we sat, each in our own lazy boy style chair on either side of my mother's bed, though we didn't sleep, not really. We took turns leaping from our chair to comfort my mother, to hold her hand and smooth the hair off her face as she did so often for us. For almost three days, we sang to her, our childhood songs: You Are My Sunshine, Under The Spreading Chestnut Tree, and many others, the bits and pieces that make up my mother's enormous musical repertoire of talent. We played music, quiet music, calm music. We laughed and remembered; we were silly, teased about telling on the other. We cried, sobbed at times, hiccupping and choking on our pending grief.

My mother was a force, a talented teacher who gave every ounce of what she had to allow her students to learn, to become the best versions of who they were. She was strict, seldom bending the rules, but she was fair and she was passionate about her job,

passionate about these children she had been entrusted with. She played the piano with a bounce and energy that was infectious, a talent of which I inherited but a snippet of, a love of music that all her progeny share in. My mother loved people, gave willingly and automatically of herself. She made her community better; she contributed and shared and applauded others who did the same.

The beauty of my mother was evident even in these bleak hours of death. Staff came in to her room, to touch her, to say their good-byes. They shared the stories that were Shirley: her enduring smile despite the loss of her memory, her eagerness to love and welcome others, her laugh and the mischief in her. Staff wept at her side and thanked her for making their tasks more rewarding, for brightening the environment that could easily be considered bleak, and they told us how they would miss “their Shirley”.

At the end, Sherry and I held our mother, told her to fly home, thanked her for her love, hoped we carry some of her genetic predisposition to accept and love life, to carry on, to smile, to lean into life and be positive. And she left us. Her breath stopped and our loss was never more evident. We wanted to cry out: “I want my mother”.

We all want our mother. That’s how we’re made, that need rolled into the lining of our very hearts. My mother wanted her own mother and at the end of her time with us, at her new beginning, I’m sure she found her mother. Her mother would have said, “There, there. You’re safe now.”

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