

LIVING A GOOD DEATH: Making A Difference Across the Great Divide

Mother died five weeks ago. She died as she lived – at peace with herself and the world, curious to explore the next adventure. What, you may wonder, does a story of death have to do with making a difference?

What if you could bring death more creatively into business or other environments? After all, people lose jobs. Organizations die. Our society encourages us to move on immediately—often before we have even acknowledged our feelings.

Pam, a colleague who never met Mother told me, “Your story about your mother graduating from college at 63 and starting a new career as a journalist made a difference for me.” In her late 50’s, recently laid off, and newly in school, Pam’s words – your mother made a difference to me – told me that this story mattered.

May these vignettes make a difference for you...

...When lung cancer was detected, surgery was the treatment. As the anesthesiologist covered the dangers, my 80-year-old mother, says, “Young man, I’ve lived a good life. I’m not afraid to die. I’ve got friends on both sides.” Her words carried me through many rough moments when, over a year later, after a full recovery from surgery, we were rocked by the news that cancer had metastasized to her brain. Now 82, healthy and vibrant, Mother took the news in stride. “My job is to die well,” she told my sister, brother and me. That she did.

...A few weeks before she died, our cousin, Debbi, called to find out why Mother sounded worse. Within two days, Debbi came to visit. “I’m here for selfish reasons. I want to know your mom’s secret for staying so positive.” Straight from the airport, Debbi sat by the bed. Mom woke with a beaming smile, “Hi, Debbi.” Mom still recognized her niece. Debbi wasted no time and asked Mom her secret. Out of a haze of sleep, Mom didn’t hesitate: “Follow your heart.” Ohhh....

...A licensed acupuncturist, my sister eased Mom’s cough and the common, intractable side affects of radiation and drugs. The hospice group witnessed new possibilities for palliative care. Impressed, they are rethinking the role of alternative treatments...

...As the end drew nearer, marked by more sleep and less food, my brother, David, my sister, Harrie Anne and I began thinking about funerals and mourning. We asked Mother if she wanted to be involved. Her response: “Surprise me.” Since neither Harrie nor I practiced Jewish customs, we began learning. Jewish mourning is an act of community. The Mourner’s Kaddish, a prayer said daily for eleven months when a parent dies, requires 10 people; it is never said alone. David goes to temple daily. Since we are not practicing Jews, Harrie and I made a pact: we would be each other’s community. After returning from services, David joins us each morning by phone from his home, 3,000 miles away, to say Kaddish. We also witness each other’s lives with a new intimacy. In her passing, Mother brought us closer together.

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...Because of his need for a minyan, David returned for services to a synagogue community that he felt had rejected him years earlier. Many people welcomed him warmly and told him they had missed him. He discovered that his community was larger than he knew.

...From the moment of diagnosis, we were held by the love of friends, family and even strangers. Spirited Work, a learning community that gathers in person four times a year, was pivotal to my experience. I had been a member for three years. In my second year, Mother joined during the season of the healer, just days before lung cancer surgery. The community fell in love with her open, loving nature. She was mother, grandmother and friend to many. A year later, when the brain cancer was discovered, my family found themselves the unexpected recipients of that love for Mom. Throughout her last days, Spirited Workers were there for all of us. Candi came weekly to do Reiki, Julia read to Mother almost weekly. Others brought food, music, or ran errands for all of us. And many, many people simply kept us in their thoughts and prayers. Everyone who came was touched by Mother's living each moment, calmly accepting whatever came to her. She taught us what it means to live fully. And as a bonus, I learned what it means to be part of a community...

...Welcoming strangers at such a time seems crazy, and yet, our desire to honor Mother, an Orthodox Jew in childhood, rippled through the reform synagogue she joined when moving close to her daughters five years ago. Our father's health had kept my parents busy, never allowing them time to become active with the congregation. We needed a minyan – the group of 10 Jews – for Kaddish every night during Shiva, the week of mourning after burial. Neither Harrie nor I knew enough Jews to make a minyan. We reached out to the temple. No one had made a request of them before for a minyan through the entire week of Shiva—strangers entering a house of mourning. It got them talking...

...Towards the end, asking for support became imperative. What a humbling surprise, the love from people, many met through work, who said yes to whatever we needed. I discovered that asking for help was a gift to others. The nakedness I felt in asking was returned many fold by the depth of connection it created...

It got me thinking:

What if we brought our whole selves to work? We must all let go of someone or something we love at times. Aren't most of us mystified by tragedy and grief, wanting to know how to do it better?

Perhaps my greatest surprise and deepest learning is that a good death happens in community. It was often a stretch, particularly when the people were strangers, to have so many witnessing what felt so private. As my friend Therese Fitzpatrick, whose support I could feel at every step, eloquently wrote, "...by making our personal lives public practice, our everyday lives are enhanced, expanding productivity and our capacity for pleasure...Isn't the story of your mother's death about how we build community in our lives in contemporary culture?"

As I move through the intense fire of early mourning, Mother's stories find their way into my work—my communities. As Pam told me, it makes a difference.