

## MOVING ON

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It always baffled me that my mother—a registered nurse—never lived her life with much of a personal health conscience. Her eating habits weren't great; she typically skipped breakfast, didn't drink a lot of water and favored fried foods when dining out. And she never found a life-long exercise habit to practice regularly.

When *other* people's health needed attention, my mother was a regular Florence Nightingale. There was nobody who could administer TLC better than dear ole' Mom. She actually made being home sick from school a pleasurable experience by providing us kids with a brightly-painted ceramic bell she'd bought while touring in Austria with our Dad. We'd ring it from our bedrooms upstairs and could always count on "Nurse Jane" to arrive soon with just the right remedy for whatever ailed us—whether it was a cool compress on our feverish foreheads or a hot water bottle for a tummy ache.

But Mom pretty much had to be at death's door to seek medical care herself. Despite her near pack-a-day affinity for Camel non-filters, amazingly, there were only a few times when she needed to do this during my childhood years. Yet, in her last two years on earth, she seemed to knock hard at that door while suffering from a series of serious ailments—most of them exacerbated by her 40-year tobacco addiction.

She often asked my siblings and me to bring home a pack of cigarettes from the metal dispenser down at Dad's garage (right after we'd purchase Sky Bars and Rolos from a nearby vending machine for ourselves). We worried about our mother's chronic smoking—especially after the surgeon general's warning came out in 1965. But the "Cigarette Smoking May be Hazardous to Your Health" message printed on the Camel packs did little to deter her toxic habit.

Mom actually tried to quit smoking in 1970, a year after Dad died. True to her obsessive-compulsive style, she hand-washed the many ashtrays in our three-story house and placed in each a scissor-cut slip of white lined paper upon which she'd neatly printed in blue ballpoint ink the following message: *NO!!!!* It took less than a week for her normally chipper morning disposition, once kick-started with a cup of Maxwell House and a Camel, to turn into that of a starving grizzly bear's. We kids began making clawing gestures behind her back and, selfishly, soon suggested to our mother that she might want to start smoking again. It didn't take long for her to do so.

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In her late 60s, my mother got motivated to get a physical when a seasonal cough lingered and learned that, in her doctor's words, a "shadow" was clouding her lungs. Seemingly scared straight, Mom quickly took her doctor's advice by applying a nicotine patch to one arm and quit smoking for good. My siblings and I hailed her feat and hoped it would provide an enhanced quality of life for many years to come. Little did we know then that it would buy us only another decade—the last two years of which would challenge Mom's belief in *simply being*.

My mother's armor of relatively good health started rusting when she hit 75. In January of 2002, she responded to one of those *Life Line Screening* solicitations you start getting in the mail when you

reach AARP membership age. With their trademarked motto printed on its envelope, *Protect your health. Protect your life*, the promotional piece apparently struck a chord with Mom. Her insurance wouldn't pay for the screening but she had it anyway. A resulting report stated that Mom had a stomach aneurysm, the size of which was just a few centimeters shy of being considered at high risk for rupturing. Her doctor decided to take a "watchful waiting" course of treatment and stuck a copy of the report in Mom's growing medical file.

By February, my mother discovered more pressing medical matters to deal with. A routine colonoscopy found a suspicious intestinal polyp ripe for removal. Not one to waste an opportunity, Mom decided to have a "three-fer" surgery to get a long-needed hysterectomy plus a recently-discovered hernia dealt with at the same time. The operation went well by later accounts from both of her surgeons. But seeing my mother lying helpless in a hospital bed the next day with what looked like a pair of children's water wings inflating and deflating around her badly varicose veined legs left a sinking feeling in my soul. It should have warned me that Mom's formerly unwavering walking gait would be challenged for the rest of her living days.

About a month later, my mother and her life partner, Norm, both picked up a bad strain of the flu. Nobody knew how weak they'd gotten until one night Norm passed out on their porch and Mom had to call 911. "The hospital only kept him for a few hours to check his vitals and then sent him home," she uttered weakly with a tinge of disappointment when I called later that day. Then, in a first-time-ever plea, she asked if I could come up and grocery shop for them.

The next day, my mother and Norm visited their doctor and got on prescribed antibiotics which slowly helped them recover. But the vulnerability I witnessed that weekend in my once-ministering mother cast her in a different light. Somberly, I realized she was starting to face her own mortality. Like looking through Mom's once Windexed windows, I clearly saw she could no longer bounce back from a seasonal bout of flu while still meticulously maintaining a four-bedroom home and caring for her pre-diabetic, recovering alcoholic partner who didn't cook. Or do laundry. "What if something *really* serious happens to Mom's health down the road?" was a question that began to haunt my mind.

I started making more half-hour drives north on weekends to check on my mother and her household. With each visit, I'd notice more neglected chores and Mom's once hungry-as-a-horse appetite waning. One sunny spring afternoon, I got brave and suggested she consider getting a visiting nurse and homemaker services to help out. "They're covered services under Medicare," I offered in an upbeat tone while my mother lay listlessly upon her living room couch clicking the TV mindlessly on a day that, in the not so distant past, might have found her outside sweeping up piles of plow truck sand the entire length of her cul-de-sac. "Absolutely not!" she replied indignantly, struggling to push up on an elbow, and aimed her if-looks-could-kill blue eyes straight at me.

A little more than a year later, I'd be forced to make that same suggestion again, only with different results.

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The year 2003 started out better for my mother. Despite her challenged gait, she had regained some strength and still liked to be out and about. We took advantage of her new "Handicapped Driver" tag for preferred parking, and went to see "Champions on Ice" together in January at the Verizon Arena. Since figure skating was such a passion of Mom's, my older sister and I took her to see "Stars on Ice" back at the Verizon in early April. "You got a couple of Tylenol?" Mom asked me at intermission. "I've had this dull headache for a couple of days," she added after downing the caplets I gave her with a sip from my Poland Springs water bottle.

I drove down to New York to visit my son during his college's Easter break and had just arrived home when I got a call from my younger sister in California. "Mom's been languishing on the couch all weekend according to Norm and complaining of an excruciating headache," Jill said anxiously, adding, "I think you better go check on her." I grabbed my still-packed bag and headed north for the night. My mother looked exhausted and told me she was booked for an MRI the next morning. Her regular doctor had prescribed Tylenol with codeine to get her through the weekend, but it wasn't helping to ease Mom's intense head pain. That night, I listened to her frequently cry out in anguish from her bedroom and watched her pointlessly pile pillows over her head when I asked in vain what I could do to help. Just when I thought she'd finally dozed off, I'd return to the guest room down the hall. All too soon, I'd hear her pleading voice pray louder and louder, "Oh, God, PLEASE, PLEASE!" and then trail off as she fell into a short period of delirious slumber. It felt like morning would never come.

My mother's MRI turned out an eventual diagnosis of temporal arthritis—a systemic illness that produces inflamed arteries, particularly near the temples, which can lead to blindness if left untreated. The good news was that Mom's condition was caught quick enough to prevent loss of sight. The bad news was that Prednisone, a steroid with all kinds of nasty side effects, turned out to be her prescribed treatment for nearly a year.

Swollen body parts, hair loss and extreme muscle weakness were just some of the things my mother endured in ensuing months. She needed to visit her doctor almost weekly for re-evaluations of her prescribed Prednisone doses which got tinkered with often. On top of that, Mom was suddenly suffering from high blood pressure and needed to start taking meds for that, too.

Things really took their toll in June. Norm was covering his part-time, bank courier route. And, my mother's neighbor, a retired nurse, stopped over to see how she was doing. Mrs. Lemire found Mom totally dehydrated on the couch which had by then become her substitute bed. She quickly called her husband to help drive my mother to the local hospital. I met them there, along with Mom's doctor, who gave me the latest prognosis. "She's developed a myopathy to the Prednisone which has caused progressive muscle weakness," he told me earnestly. "We're going to admit her."

A week later, my mother was sent home with a walker and the phone number of an at-home physical therapist. She hated having both. But not being able to drive for two months was an even worse fate she had to face. So Mom steadfastly stuck with her walking aid and PT person all summer. By September, she was piloting around town in her Pontiac again much to my family's amazement. We celebrated her victory by seeing a Patti Lupone performance at the Capital Center for the Arts and made more of the holidays than usual that year.

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In February of 2004, a follow-up visit with my mother's surgeon proved that Mom's stomach aneurysm had grown larger in the past six months—probably due to her elevated blood pressure and being on Prednisone, he theorized. Plans were quickly made for Mom to be stepped-down off the steroid, and vascular tests were performed to see if her arteries could handle a less-invasive type of surgery.

"Your arteries are the worst looking ones I've ever seen," a consulting surgeon told her candidly up at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Hanover, NH, after running a CT scan. My mother grinned wildly, rolled her eyes flirtatiously and patted the nattily dressed doctor's shoulder. "Some people will do anything to get attention," she joked, her laugh-and-the-world-laughs-with-you philosophy shining through. We drove the 90 minutes back to Mom's house in relative silence knowing we'd be back in two days for the endovascular procedure scheduled on St. Patrick's Day.

I spent the night at Mom's before heading up to Hanover for her pre-op work the next day and stayed up late to watch a PBS broadcast of Dr. Wayne Dyer—an inspirational speaker who has provided me with much food for thought over the years. I took copious notes on his talk that evening, which was about getting the most out of life, and then absentmindedly left them on Mom's dining room table before going to bed. The next morning, my heart felt lodged in my throat when I found my notes still on the table with some penned remarks my mother had added to them. Alongside Dyer's "don't die with your music still in you" quote, she had written the following:

**DON'T TALK ABOUT DEATH TO ME ... I'M GOING TO KEEP ON LIVING**  
**WELL FOR YEARS TO COME!**

My mother's Irish heritage must have brought her luck as she came through her surgery with no complications and was discharged the following day. In three months time, I was helping Mom ease into an exercise routine by taking small walks along the boardwalk in Weirs Beach.

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By August, my mother had lost most of her Prednisone-induced swelling and was fitting into clothes she hadn't worn in over a year. My sisters and I surprised her with tickets to see the Boston Pops at Gilford's Meadowbrook Pavilion. We laughed until tears streaked our faces when Mom whispered to us while conductor Keith Lockhart led the Pops in a rousing rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever" that his tuxedo-panted tush reminded her of a Parker House bun.

On the third Saturday in September, I drove up to visit my mother for the afternoon. I found her dressed in a new pair of slim jeans and glowing in her favorite blazer which sported the Kokopelli pin I'd brought her several years before from a trip to Sedona. "Hey, Punk!" Mom called out gleefully, using my childhood nickname as I entered her kitchen, and gave me a big hug. "Let's take a ride over to see your Uncle Beau," she suddenly suggested. "He just called to say your Aunt Irene and Uncle Vic are visiting from Florida."

"Sure," I readily agreed, pleased to see her so full of life.

For two hours, I listened intently as my mother and her contemporaries told stories of days gone. Over goblets of shared Chardonnay that Uncle Beau's wife graciously poured us, Mom started telling some of her famous jokes that drew hearty rounds of laughter. She beamed in the limelight of attention. It reminded me of how she held court at family parties back in her prime—telling jokes my cousins fondly referred to as "sicky quickies by Aunt Jane."

I dropped Mom back to her home a few hours later, both of us high on the feeling of having spent a pleasurable day in the comfort of loved ones.

It was the last time I would ever see her.

Two days later, I got a call from my oldest sister who had been living at our mother's house for the past year to provide support. I heard her voice shakily say from my phone's receiver, "Mom's passed". I couldn't believe what I was hearing and stupidly blurted out, "You're kidding!" She was not. Our mother had died in her sleep on the living room couch.

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Reflecting back on my mother's last years makes me wonder if she would have lived to see my second marriage—or celebrate her grandson's 30<sup>th</sup> birthday had she lived a healthier lifestyle. But then I think of people like Jim Fixx, a dedicated long distance runner who dropped dead of a heart attack at age 52.

I realize now that what my mother may have lacked in personal health awareness she more than made up for by living here on earth with style, grace and a determined sense of humor. Reviewing the notes I took from Dr. Dyer's talk that aired on PBS six months before Mom died, I see that she was already practicing the principles he espoused for having "the power of intention" in your life. Like *practice infinite patience. And be the type of person you want to attract.*

But the one she enacted best—and for which I admire her most—happened at the end of her life:

*Surrender and let go.*

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