

A Parent's Last Lesson By: Ann Michael Henry

It was just a year ago. It was August. I had been taking summer easy, playing with my 6 and 10 year old. Having friends over and easing up on work a bit. After all, part of the reason for running a home-based business was to be able to do just that. As I flipped the calendar to August I remember thinking that I had better spend some time on the business and start gearing up for fall.

I also had to take my mother to the doctor. She had been complaining off and on for the past year and a half about being tired and sluggish. She had lost a bit of weight and was having trouble eating. She was now on her sixth doctor trying to figure out what was wrong. So off I went that early August morning for the 2-hour drive to my parents home to accompany her to that appointment. It was a life-changing day.

By early afternoon she was admitted to the hospital. Initially the doctors thought she had less than 6 months; then less than 3 months. In actuality, it was less than a month. The whys and hows of the failure of the medical system are not the purpose of my writing.

As a parent we are charged with the honor of teaching our children. Children learn so much from us, how to be kind and respectful, how to read and write, how to use the potty, how to deal with broken hearts, how to find a job and so much more. I am blessed to have a parent who taught me how to die.

At my mother's funeral by cousin Barbara commented, "the apple didn't fall far from the tree!" My mother was the consummate organizer and my cousin was complementing me on how well things had been arranged. The reality was, my mom did it all.

Although it may sound morbid and surreal to plan your own funeral, it is a truly a gift of love that you give to those left behind. Whatever religious beliefs you may or may not have we all share one reality, death. We know that dealing with our day-to-day realities is often trying. We procrastinate and avoid. We make excuses and create barriers. But, when we finally dig into some of our toughest issues, we always feel a sense of calm and accomplishment when it has been dealt with and completed. The same holds true for dealing with death.

About six years ago my mom began making a file of important papers for me to have "just in case". She didn't need to pull them together or go in search of them. She knew where they were; she was organized. She handed me a multi-pocket expandable file folder. Each section was labeled and it's contents detailed. There was one for her, one for my dad, one for financial information, one for work benefits, one for burial information and one for miscellaneous. She had even composed their obituaries.

Next she enlisted my support to talk to my dad. He was of the opinion that "I'll deal with that (a will) when the time comes". I can feel the hair bristling on the back of your neck as you read this. That was my reaction as well.

During their next visit I had a heart to heart with my father. It was one of those moments where you realize that the tables had turned. I was now parenting my parents. It had been happening slowly over the previous few years, but now the change had taken place. I had to explain the consequences of not having things "in order". He was not happy with me although in his heart, he knew that I was right. With tears in his eyes he agreed to see a lawyer. He was clearly dealing with a fearful thought "if I do a will, then I will die".

My parents had done some estate planning a few years prior to our conversation. Unfortunately, the attorney that they dealt with did not specialize in wills, trusts and estates. Once I got them connected with our attorney, who did, she had to undo some of the previous work. Luckily the changes were made without any legal or financial complications. Within six weeks of my conversation with my dad, "things were in order". Wills were revised; we were all educated on transitioning to assisted living or a skilled nursing environment when the time came, gifting, selling their home some day, settling an estate and so much more.

Once that was done, my mom wrote me a letter. She started the letter by saying: "I hope that this doesn't upset you". It didn't, we had spoken of the subject several times before. The letter contained information on how she wanted her funeral to take place. She had picked out the dress that she wanted to wear, the one that she wore to my wedding. It was hanging in a garment bag in her closet along with shoes, earrings, and hose. It had been hanging there for a number of years already.

She included details of what she wanted for the wake and actual funeral. The only viewing she wanted was on the morning of the funeral for a half an hour. That was to be followed by a brief prayer service at the funeral parlor, then off to church for the service. She had picked out the place for the luncheon afterwards and provided me with the name of the person to contact. The menu was also noted; from soup and salad right through to dessert.

No flowers thank you, just a few from the family. She never understood why people sent flowers after someone died. "Send me flowers while I'm still alive so that I can enjoy them" she would say. Please make donations to the hospital guild and my church. Later, as she rested in comfort at the hospice she asked that donations be made to this cause because "these people are angels".

Where she was to be buried along with a drawing of her final resting place was also included. She wanted to be by her mother. She even included a photograph of herself on a good hair day! That was how she wanted the funeral director to fix it. But, please, "do not use the photo as part of the obituary, as a matter of fact, no photo and no mention of my age".

Of course, there was the detailed information about which casket she wanted. It was itemized; price, item number, color etc., for they had met with the funeral director and picked things out. There was even a note that said that the price would probably go up with the passing of time!

I was relieved to receive this letter and to have conversations with my mom about dying. They are very odd conversations to have, but truth be told, not nearly as uncomfortable as the one about the birds and the bees. I never had to answer the question "what would my mom want?" I knew. More importantly, she knew that I would honor her requests.

The time between her diagnosis and passing was a whirlwind. My parents lived two hours away I was traveling back and forth. I have two young children to tend to and a husband who has a job to deal with. On top of that, my mother was the primary caregiver for my dad. All of this preparation and planning my mother had made before, made the final month so much more manageable. It gave me the time to deal with my father, something that was nearly all consuming. If I had had to deal with all of the paperwork and all of the arrangements I would have surely cracked. I'm an only child; I had to do it all.

While still in the hospital she had me contact the funeral director. "Now Harry has retired, so you'll talk to one of his sons". Well, Harry come out of retirement to help me. He had known my parents and my mom's family for decades and was insistent on being there for me. So, I delivered her outfit. I could see the mental checklist working in her head...good, that one's done. She also signed the deed to her car so that I could sell it. We talked about where to donate her clothes and which one of her friends could give me a hand with that task.

We talked about what to do with my father, something that turned out to be the biggest challenge of her passing. But, I knew that it would be that way, it's something I've known all of my life, once a difficult person always a difficult person.

My mother accepted her dying with grace and dignity, the way she lead her life. The day that she arrived at the hospice she was nearly two hours late because she had to get her hair done before she left the hospital! She arrived, dressed to the nines in her white linen Capri pants and hot pink and white striped top, make-up on, wearing her Jackie-O sunglasses and chatting away with the attendants. She accepted her destiny, she was at peace. There were sad moments and moments of tears. There were joyous ones, when she saw friends, family and especially when her beloved grandchildren visited.

She was calm and accepting, she would say, "I've had a good life". Her faith in God kept her strong to the very end. It was this faith what helped her teach me how to die that and her belief that a parent should never burden a child. I couldn't count the times that she said: "it's my life, it's my responsibility. You have two children to raise and a husband to be with, that's why I've made all of these arrangements and taken care of things." I've told her, but I'll say it again, thanks mom.

© Copyright

All rights reserved. Reproduction of any kind of this article is not permitted without written permission from the author.