

For What You Never Did

By
Tim Schnabel

This article, originally written in 1987, is used by the author when conducting his workshop “The Experience of Grief...What Constitutes Good Grieving?”

As the plane accelerated down the Atlanta runway heading for Boston this clear, brisk, second Thursday in January, I prayed that Ma would still be alive when I arrived. Knowing that her death was imminent from terminal lung cancer, I had already been grieving these past four months. I was therefore unprepared, looking out the airplane window, to be filled with such a deep sadness that she might already be dead. What made this trip easier was that my sisters wanted my support and I sure wanted theirs.

That fateful week began early Monday morning with a call from my sister, Judy, saying she thought Ma would only live a few more days. She asked if I could fly to Boston on short notice. Of course! What was eerie about the timing of my sister’s call was that I was dreaming that Ma had died as the ringing of the phone awakened me.

On Wednesday I called to find the older of my two sisters, Ann Marie, crying, “I don’t think Ma will last the morning, Tim. Go ahead and make arrangements to come.” Annie recounted her conversation with Ma the previous day. In a very clear voice Ma asked, “I really am dying, aren’t I, Annie? I am not going to lick this, am I?” No, you’re not, Ma,” Annie gently told her “Well then, I don’t want to be in any pain,” she lamented.

Since Ma’s diagnosis in late September I had returned to New England three times. Each visit was an exercise in letting go and saying good bye. With the drives and walks through the neighborhoods of my youth, I recalled old scenes and emotions – revisiting with them as well.

Today my destination is Cape Neddick in Southern Maine where Judy lives and where Ma was making her last earthly home. Judy and her family wanted Ma to be with them, “Just ‘til I get my strength back,” Ma declared before she left the hospital. Throughout her two-month residence with Judy, Ma occasionally mentioned returning to her home, an hour’s drive away in Massachusetts, “If just to go for a visit,” she would say. Given her rapidly declining health, that visit never took place.

As the plane gently, yet firmly let go of my adopted home in the South, I knew this journey would be the most challenging. Included with my warm winter clothes, I packed the suit I would wear at Ma’s viewing and funeral. In addition to warmth, I also packed comfort – soothing music on cassettes with a Walkman. Most carefully though, I packed one of the most beautiful gifts Ma gave me, a special letter she had written me a few years before, anxiously checking and double checking to make sure I hadn’t forgotten it.

Once airborne, I reflected upon what was to be my last telephone conversation with my mother. It was New Year's morning and she extended a very warm, "Happy New Year, Tim. I hope this is the best year ever for you." I remember wishing her peace and comfort. Having recently purchased a new home, she wanted my new address. Rather than ask one of my nieces to write it down, she struggled with the pen and paper, frequently asking me to repeat myself. It wasn't spoken that she would never need the information.

Arriving in Boston, I immediately called Cape Neddick. No change. The drive north would take less than two hours. Freshly fallen snow adorned a New England I fondly remembered. During the drive as well as my six-day visit, part of me felt very young and very fragile – perhaps like new snow clinging to a tree when the wind blows.

Nearing my destination, the road to Judy's house was picturesque and rustic New England: snow-covered limbs, frozen ponds, snow people in front yards and children bundled up playing outside. Although it was the 8th of January, many homes were still adorned with cheerful Christmas decorations. Such a bittersweet welcome.

As dusk made its full presence, I turned on Greenleaf Parsons Road. Seeing the table lamp in Ma's room aglow and the living room Christmas candles extending their greeting, I knew Ma was still alive. I felt relief with the warm hugs of welcome from my sisters and brothers-in-law.

Walking into Ma's room, I was struck by how much she had withered in just five weeks. As she lay there with the oxygen tube connected to her nose and struggling to breathe, I sat on the edge of her bed, taking her hand. "Hi Ma, it's me," I said softly. "Hi, Ma, it's Tim. I am here," spoken a little louder. Slowly opening her eyes and gazing at me a few seconds, she spoke in a feeble voice, "Oh Tim, I am glad you're here. I love you. I am not going to make it, Tim." "I know Ma. That's why I am here and I love you, too." With tears in my eyes I accepted her spontaneous gift of "I love you." Except for one or two short sentences thereafter, that brief and intimate sharing was to be our last.

Ma lived another three days and I felt so privileged to be with her, Ann Marie and her husband, and Judy with her husband and daughters. It was the first time my sisters and I had been under one roof for such duration for almost 20 years.

We kept vigils our last three nights with Ma, each taking turns. Those were the most peaceful times for me. The house was quiet and Ma's room wintry cool as she wanted the window cracked to help her breathe. During those precious moments I prayed, talked quietly to her even though she didn't respond, provided comfort for her when she was lucid, listened to the tapes I brought and tenderly reviewed the letter she had written me six years earlier.

It was 1981 and I was in advanced clinical training as a psychotherapist. As part of my personal growth I was aware that I had received recognition from my mother for things I had accomplished, but I was wanting to hear from her that she loved me for the person and man I am...for my being.

After one powerful training weekend prior to my birthday, I called her making a request for a special present. Mobilizing my courage, I asked her to tell me that she loved me for me, for who I am as opposed to what I had accomplished. Without hesitation, but with some awkwardness, she told me how much she loved me. I also asked her to write me a letter describing what it had been like for her when I was born and having me as her son. What wishes, dreams, expectations did she have for me way back then? Separate from my actual birth, the letter I received was the finest birthday present she ever gave me.

On the first of those cold, clear nights, with only the sounds of her oxygen machine and labored breathing, I began whispering those precious words I had already read dozens of times.

“In three more days you will be celebrating your 37th birthday. That seems like a long time, but hasn’t it gone by fast, Tim? To me, it seems like only a short time ago you were born. I was so frightened the first time I held you. I loved you so much, but my thoughts were, ‘Will I care for you properly to let you grow to be a man and perhaps even become president?’”

I would occasionally stop reading to wipe away tears or come back to the here and now when she became lucid, mumbled or needed to be shifted in her bed.

“Through it all you have grown to be a man and accomplish so much. You have done it on your own. I love you dearly not for what you have done, but because you are my son.” We all have our faults. No one is perfect. We overlook the faults of our loved ones, don’t we Tim?”

It was during my second trip to Salem Hospital after her diagnosis, an absolutely gorgeous fall day close to Halloween, when I gathered my courage. My saying I wanted to talk interrupted the regular pastime chitchat in which we customarily engaged. The topic was love and forgiveness.

“Remember the letter you sent me a few years ago on my birthday? I will always treasure it, Ma.” After that warm up to let myself know I could actually get the words out, I continued. “Ma, I want to say some things I have never said to you. I want you to know that in loving you I have forgiven you for all the things you did which I considered unfair, unjust or even mean. I regret we were never good friends. I am glad you are my mother and think I did quite well in getting you.”

She looked at me for the longest time. With tears welling in her eyes she said with such tenderness, "Thank you." After another long silence I gently replied, "You are most welcome, Ma, and I would appreciate you telling me again that you love me for who I am, not just for what I have done?"

"Oh, Tim," her voice breaking, "I love you for who you are, because you are my son, for what you have done and...for what you haven't done" With tears rolling down my cheeks I reached for her hand. It was a moment of deep connection and healing with a woman it had been so difficult for me to be close to, as well as to separate from.

Back in the chilly room in Maine, I prayed she would let go of the struggling and her life. I gently stroked her hair, whispering, "It's ok to let go, Ma. You'll be fine and we'll be fine." She mumbled and I sat back down in the chair next to her bed.

I was in awe watching her. She would periodically move her right hand to her head as though testing to see if her forehead and face were still part of her. Once she quickly removed the oxygen tube from her nose. "Ma, you need your oxygen," I said trying to take the tube from her hand. My action was met with a vice grip! She wouldn't let go. At the other end of life, she held onto that tube the way a five-month old would hold onto a clanging key ring.

Well aware that I was dealing with my first teacher in stubbornness, I returned to my chair, deciding for the moment not to compete. A few minutes passed. Then all of a sudden with a sense of deliberateness, she moved her hand to her nose and replaced the tube herself. She had announced she would be with us awhile longer. I returned to reading her letter.

"You started school at 5 years old. I cried that day because it was a new adventure for you and you would begin to have other interests. I did this when Ann Marie and Judy started school, too."

In less than two days Ma would begin a new adventure and I cried a lot that day.

"Growing up you were timid of many things. Guess I instilled that in you. It was only because I loved you and didn't want you to get hurt. Thank God you had the courage to venture forth and accomplish so very much. I guess dad's influence helped you."

Yes, I had been timid of many things, I had ventured forth, often with scare and I still have plenty of courage. Looking at Ma I reminded myself that one of the emotions I was feeling was scare and how much I needed my courage now, watching her give up her life.

"Having asthma was difficult for you. Many a night daddy and I sat up with you. We loved you too much to put you in a hospital where you would be alone and frightened. We were doing what would have been done in the hospital, praying the medicine would relieve your coughing spasms."

Putting the letter down, I reached over and took her hand, quietly saying, “Having emphysema and lung cancer have been most difficult and scary for you. I pray your breathing will ease and you will let go of your life gently.” I paused.

“Mostly, I am glad you are dying with dignity. I am glad to be here with you. The tender and incredible caring of my two sisters touches me and I know how much they will miss you. Even though we have not been close, I shall miss you. I will miss hearing your excited, ‘Oh, hi Tim,’ greeting when I would call. Also, I will miss your newsy letters and poetic cards on my birthdays and holidays.”

One of the attributes I have admired in our family is our capacity for humor and through this stressful journey there were gems. It was Ma who set the tone. On New Year’s afternoon, Ma was taken to the local hospital because the medication was neither easing her breathing or relieving her pain.

The admitting physician expressed concern over her elevated heart rate. “Mrs. Schnabel, have you ever had a heart attack?” he inquired. In typical fashion Ma responded, “Why no! Am I having one now?”

During her final three days, Annie, a registered nurse, focused on providing Ma, another registered nurse, her most loving care. In her vigilance she responded to Ma’s every move and moan. On one occasion Annie was leaning over Ma and tenderly asked, “Are you all right.” Ma, in a moment of lucidity and perhaps bothered by all the attention, quipped in her crusty New England style, “Annie, unless you see me covered with blood, I’m fine!”

Ma’s last days were marked with attempts to get out of bed “to go home,” as she would grasp the rails of her hospital bed, trying to lift herself. Words of comfort would not assuage this restlessness. That Saturday Ma again feebly told Annie she wanted to go home. Annie’s response of, “You’re home, Ma” was met with, “No Annie, tomorrow I will be home.” She died the next day.

On Sunday morning the light, unexpected snowfall was tapering off. Annie remarked that Ma’s breathing had changed and she seemed closer to death. Around 1:00 p.m. she became incontinent for the first and only time and was being changed. I decided to shave. As I was finishing, Judy ran through the house calling to us, “Everyone, come quickly!” We gathered at Ma’s bedside watching her take her last breaths.

Taking Ma’s left hand and reaching out, I asked that we join hands and say a prayer. One by one, we gripped each other’s hand completing the circle around the bed.

“Oh, heavenly Father and Divine Spirit, kindly shine your light on us as we let go of our dear mother and grandmother. Jerry Delaney Schnabel was a good woman and a good mother. We pray for her peaceful and immediate arrival with you where we trust you have prepared a most special place...and may perpetual light shine upon her forever, Amen.”

We then followed with The Lord's Prayer. After Ma stopped breathing Annie ever so tenderly removed the oxygen tube saying, "I'm going to take this off now, Ma. You won't be needing it anymore." Once the machine was turned off, welcomed silence filled the room.

One by one we slowly drifted towards the living room, where we gathered to put into motion the plans we had made for her funeral. Through the conversation, I looked down the corridor into the bedroom at Ma and felt drawn to return.

Back in the bedroom I welcomed the quiet and felt such relief that she was no longer struggling. Sitting on her bed I was touched by the change of expression on her face. She was softer now and still warm. I said a prayer of thanks that her body was no longer shaking or her lungs heaving. As the final flakes of snow caressed the world beyond the bedroom window, I was at last, peaceful. After a long while, Judy entered the room, honoring the quiet. Then, through the silence I asked, "Judy, will you hold me?" She did and I sobbed for the longest time.

I am back in Atlanta now adjusting to many changes in my life including mourning Ma. As I was mailing out announcements for my new practice, I reached for an envelope and began writing Ma's address, thinking how much she would enjoy receiving one. My tears began falling onto the partially completed envelope and the pain I felt signaled her permanent absence.

Caressing my damp eyes with tissues, I reflected on the image of her peacefulness in that Maine bedroom after she died. I turned up the volume on my internal speaker, hearing her voice speak those precious words to me from her hospital bed that October..."I love you for who you are, because you are my son, for what you have done and for what you haven't done."

Thank you Ma and I love you always...for who you were, because you were my mother, for what you did and for what you never did.

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