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When the time comes to say goodbye | Parenting Parents

By Leslie Kelly

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It was our annual excursion to Remlinger's pumpkin patch that made it all seem real.

My mother loved that fall-time adventure. We'd been doing it every year since we moved to Washington. This was our first year making the trip without her.

My mother died Sept. 29.

Some in the family thought it might be too soon to do a family event without her. But I knew that mom would have wanted us to go. So we went in memory of her.

It was the same trip as in years past. Ride a few rides. Have some miniature cinnamon doughnuts. Pick pumpkins from the acres of pumpkins patches. And have a bite to eat.

Although the youngest grandkid is now 11, and we really didn't have any "children" with us, as an outing, it was OK. Even my dad, who is 87, went along. But we all missed mom.

It's something we all know or will know. Someday, we will lose our parents. Someday, that woman who has always been there to wipe away the tears and make everything better will be gone. But until you experience it, you don't know the emptiness that invades your heart and mind.

My mother was a fixer. When I didn't get invited to the most popular girl's birthday party, my mom made me feel better. She took me out on a special evening to the movies.

When I didn't get asked to homecoming dance in high school, she took me shopping and bought me a new dress anyway.

When my baby sister didn't get accepted into the college she had hoped to attend, my mother offered to go get a six-pack of beer and drown her sorrows with her. You need to know that my mother never drank. So that was something really out of her comfort zone.

When I was 30 years old and my parents moved from the place where they had raised me to retire in Seattle, I stood at the curb watching the moving van as it was filled with their belongings. I was so torn because I knew I couldn't go with them — that my life was right where I was for the time being. My mother said to me, "This is something I can't fix." Little did she know that just by acknowledging that, she'd done more than fix it. She'd told me that it was OK that I still wanted to be her little girl.

The last month of my mother's life wasn't pretty. Many people who die of cancer have had far worse. But seeing her go from a very active engaged woman, to someone who didn't know what day it was, couldn't walk on her own, and who needed help with the simplest of things, was devastating to her and to all of us. I could see the frustration on her face when she couldn't speak what was in her thoughts. It was something I thought I was prepared for. But I wasn't.

It doesn't matter what age you are, losing your mother changes you. You know the world will never be the same. The only person who had loved you all your life, no matter what, is gone.

When you become the parent to your parents, it seems an unnatural role. Taking care of the only people who had the responsibility to take care of you seems backwards. But it's a role that many Baby Boomers, and for that matter most generations, have accepted. Learning to live with their needs — be it shopping for them, cleaning for them, taking care of the finances, even tending to their personal care — is done, not out of a sense of have to, but a sense of loyalty and love.

After months of watching over my mom, and making sure she had the best medical care she could get, I felt tired. Trips to chemo. Trips to radiation. Trips to the doctor. And in between, cooking, shopping, laundry and just sitting with her watching baseball on TV. I'm lucky I have siblings that were with me on this journey. I can't imagine what only children go through.

When her last week came around, she wasn't fully conscious. Mostly she slept. And even though my Dad is someone who doubts that she could hear us, my sisters and I sat with her and talked to her and sang to her and played her favorite music.

I'd already told mom everything I needed to. Early on in her disease, I wrote her a letter and told her everything I wanted her to know. I'd apologized for the days in junior high when I was sure I had every illness ever discovered, from raging bird flu to a brain tumor. Patiently, she took me to the doctor, or the emergency room, until I finally accepted that I was healthy, but that I had a significant fear of death.

I thanked her for the many wonderful birthdays and Christmases we had as children — the gifts we wanted so much, the great dinners served on the good china with linen napkins, all of it pulled together by her without much help from us.

After three days of sitting with mom, afraid to leave for fear she'd pass without me there, I secretly prayed to God to take her soon. I felt guilty for doing that. But she had no quality of life left and I knew she knew her time had come. She passed peacefully on a Friday evening.

The following few days were a blur of making funeral arrangements, comforting my sisters and their children, and making sure my father was going to be OK.

Since then, I've done a lot of remembering. Birthdays. Holidays. Good times and bad. I've cried in public and in private. I've read and re-read cards and notes that friends have sent me, especially those from former students who praised the teacher my mother was.

And I've had many conversations with my mother since she died.

Yes, I know her spirit is still with me and she hears me. It's not quite like the telephone conversations we had every Sunday evening when I would call her. It's hard to remember when I read something that I know she'd like, I can't just call her and chat. It's a different relationship. It's a new normal. But it's something that surviving children have to accept. Mom is gone. I can't call her. I can't go visit her. I can't hug her. But I can still love her.

Next: Sorting through my mother's possessions.

If you have a story about parenting your parents that you would like to share, email lkelly@soundpublishing.com.

—Leslie Kelly is editor of Kitsap Weekly and special sections for the Kitsap News Group.



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