

The Passing

I'd like to tell you a story that is uncomfortable for me to write and, I'm sure will be uncomfortable for you to read, but tell it I must. The story is the story of my Mother's death.

My Mother died after suffering for years from the disease of emphysema, a disease that robs your body of breath very slowly and painfully. She died on July 29, 1994 at 4:00 PM in the Saint Anthony's Hospice, Amarillo, TX. Those are the facts.

My Mother entered the hospital in mid-July suffering not only from advanced emphysema, but also with a blockage of her bowels. The blockage required surgery to correct, but due to the advanced condition of her lung disease, the prognosis for surviving the surgery itself was marginal at best.

Anyone who knows my Mother, knows one thing. If force of will is involved, she will win. With the knowledge that the Texas Iron Lady was involved, my Mother decided to undergo the surgery. I and my brother from South Texas were called to Mother's death bed on July 20, 1994. We arrived later that day to find that true to form, Mother's will had served her well. She had survived the surgery and appeared to be recovering well. Relief! Once again, Mother's will has won out over the Angels. We both stayed a couple of more days to make sure she was recovering, then on July 24, we both went back to our families and work believing the worst was over, at least for a few months.

On July 27 we both received the chilling phone call we all wish we never have to receive. "Mother is dying," my sister, Marie (the Registered Nurse in the Air Force) said through the tears. I listened intently as she said, yes, Mother had taken a turn for the worst and her survival was to be measured in hours, not days. Could I come back soon? Yes, I'll be there as quickly as I can. Yes, boss lady, I have to leave

again. Take all the time you need, the job will be here when you get back. Let us know how things go. OK. Wild trip accross Kansas and to Amarillo. Speeding ticket. Intense anxiety. I arrive.

She's Alive! Force of will. Yes, that is what it was. Pure willpower.

My brother, Robert, the oldest of six children, the man we all expect to "stand up" for us all and to keep up the fire, turns to me with tearful eyes and says "I can't understand how anyone who sees this and smokes can continue to do so!" Such suffering my Mother endured. And he had to watch. You see Mom and Dad moved to the same town as my brother five years ago. They wanted to settle in and get ready for that awful day. Robert, as the oldest, was trusted with all the details. The will, the funeral fund, the insurance, the Medicare, the bills, the everyday problems. Robert, bless his heart, managed to keep his head up and his eyes dry through it all except for the one moment.

She stays in the Critical Care Unit a few hours, then the Doctor recommends she be moved to the Intensive Care Unit (two rooms down), as she is no longer critical because of the surgery. She stays in the ICU for awhile (time is now a blur, we know it is passing but we are oblivious to it) before the medical staff tell us what we really didn't want to hear, but knew was true. She was dying. Marie, who we had been relying on for months for her medical expertise, becomes the one we all turn to and ask "Is that right? Tell us it isn't so, PLEASE!"

Yes, she could choose the ventalator and delay meeting her Mother and Father in Heaven, or she could not. She chose not.

The Doctor tells us about an alternative to the ICU which might make Mother's remaining hours more comfortable and allow the family better access to her. He recommends we move Mother to the Hospice run by the Hospital. It's a seperate building from the hospital. No, it's

not a place where people go to die. It's a place where people who have reached the limits of medical technology go to either get better or not. In the beginning the distinction seems nebulous and callous. My God in Heaven, how wrong we were!

Physically the Hospice is not much different than an ordinary hospital wing. Emotionally the Hospice is filled with feelings that hospitals are not. The sterile atmosphere ends somewhere in the hallway between the Hospital and Hospice, my guess is about one inch from the Hospital end.

My Mother and Father were blessed with six children, four boys and two girls. First came three boys, Robert, Donald, and Stephen; then two girls Pauline and Marie, then I came along last. At the hospice we could all be in Mother's room at once. In fact, they put her in a double room to accommodate our family. We were all there, my Father, Mother's brothers and sisters, my brothers and sisters, their children and their children's children. After all, love can make sick people well, can't it?

Mother was one of six herself. She had three sisters and two brothers. The three who were not too sick or caring for intensely sick spouses came to help my Mother. Love could make her better! We had faith. She had demonstrated such force of will before, we all believed she would will herself back to us. All we had to do was be there and let her know we were there. My brother from south Texas and I knew it was true. She had done it all too often before. We arrive and she gets better.

We all do what we can for each other. Sleep is something nobody gets much of. Thursday night is not too tough. Mother seems to fall into a less painful sleep than during the day Thursday. Friday goes by in stages. They remove the only remaining tube from Mother's body. A

few hours later they change the oxygen from her nose to a mask. Later they remove the mask and oxygen altogether.

They had told us that there will be several instances where her breathing will appear to stop, only to start again. Her shallow, painful breaths get more and more shallow, less and less frequent. Finally the end. Peacefulness. Sobs. I hear myself, although I'm not there saying it., "Oh my God!"

Moments later, after we have called the medical staff in, we all, husband, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, grandchildren and great-grandchildren move out into the courtyard adjoining the hospice.

It had been a partly cloudy day. Just a few clouds overhead at various times throughout the day.

As the last of the family enters the courtyard, tears falling from all our cheeks, it begins to rain from a sky that was sunny not a minute before. The rain lasts only a minute or two.

Do you believe in God?

Dan Mills