What I've Learned from My Mother's Death

Mary Palmer, 1934 – 2026

My mother died in late March. She was nearly 92 years old, had spent the prior 15 months in an ED/rehab/homecare cycle that was challenging, and was exploring assisted living and skilled nursing options for the last 6 months. She spent her last two months in a nice skilled nursing facility.

There are four siblings in our family – my three older brothers and myself, the youngest and only girl. None of my brothers live within five hours of our home, and my mother (and my father before her) lived in the house with me for the last 22 years. I was her care coordinator, her home maintenance lead, her financial advisor (both licensed advisor and unofficial manager of household finances), power of attorney, trustee for two trusts, and am now executor of her estate.

I often tell my clients that my work is part financial training and education, part life experience. The ability to apply the two together can make one a powerful advisor. I think half of my life experience has come in the last 10 years in dealing with my parents' aging – the medical, financial and legal issues and decisions that have been made to guide them through their last years.

Some of what I've learned is below.

Everyone starts too late to get rid of things – my mother was a child of the 1930s - everything had value, everything could be repaired, everything should be kept. My parents downsized twice, and we still have a garage full of stuff. In her mid-to-late 80s, she struggled to get rid of things that she thought had value or that someone else might want, but mostly because it was emotional for her as she got to advanced age. START EARLY! Decide what really matters to you, save one or two things for your family members, and pare down everything else.

Everyone starts too late to plan for added care **–** my parents had platinum long-term care coverage and used it for home care for years. But when it came time for them to need 24x7 access to care, they fought going to assisted living facilities. That meant that many of their health crises fell to me to manage, and it meant a lot of trips to the hospital. Right now, senior care seems to work better if you sign onto the continuum of care environment. Mom should have gone to assisted living about a year to 18 months ago, but she felt she was fine at home. She was, but you move when you're fine, not when you're in a crisis. It takes six months or more to get accepted to the assisted living space you want. Then the move-in effort and adjusting to a new life is months more. She never made it there – went from home to a skilled nursing facility.

Get your estate documents done NOW – I can't imagine navigating the last ten years without having durable powers of attorney and healthcare proxies for both my parents. The ability to act quickly on their behalf for legal, financial, and healthcare issues was critical. Even in my mother's last days in palliative care, I had the ability (and foresight) to shift funds out of her investments to the bank accounts to cover her funeral costs and a month or two of expenses on the house – my last act as PoA. I'm awfully glad I thought of that because…

Everything takes longer than you think and is more complicated that you think it will be – I've never served as executor of an estate. After one month, I was over being shocked at how complicated legal and financial systems make everything. My parents' wishes were simple and clear. There's no conflict between my brothers and other family members. But the processes are opaque and assume there are problems that need to be resolved. They're filled with extraneous steps, wet ink signoffs, and demands for documentation that keep you from being able to move quickly and easily to a close. "Transfer on Death" doesn't mean a check is sent after someone dies. Life insurance claims take more detailed bits of information than they used to. Once a death is reported to Social Security, automated processes take some control from you. My mother's estate is easier than most to settle, and I have an advantage being the executor, the financial advisor, and the trustee. I can get information that others can't by changing hats. But steps that I thought would finish a job often just generated two or three more tasks.

You're not in charge – systems…man. Healthcare system, senior care system, legal system, banking system, financial system – whichever one you're in, they are populated with people who are trying their darndest to help, but almost always require that you (or your parent) give over a big chunk of agency to engage. The more you try to control, the harder it gets.

Estate settlement can be made easier with some planning – Learn how to transfer assets outside of your will. Your family will thank you for it. Financial accounts can be transferred to beneficiaries outside of your will. Whole life insurance can be a holding tank for money that passes outside of your will. Trusts can be used to readily transfer larger assets via the trustee. Titling bank accounts and financial accounts jointly with a spouse or child makes them easy to pass to that person. Your financial advisor and your estate lawyer should work together to help you minimize assets that are actually held in your estate as much as possible.

Long-term care is more a plan than a policy – My mother had a policy to help with her care that served her well. However, in her final year, we were stunned to learn that this platinum policy would still leave her pulling significant money from her investment funds to pay for care. Struggling with low Medicaid reimbursements and rising costs, the better care facilities in our region often require an applicant have as much as $400,000 in liquidatable assets (cash, investments, home equity, etc.)

before they will consider an application. My mother was 92 – there was no plan that she'd have that much money left at that advanced age.

***Don't over-protect your assets* –** See the above comment. If your estate planning is designed to "protect your assets from going to long-term care" you may find that you've boxed yourself into a corner when it comes time for you to seek care. That's not a successful financial plan; it's a recipe for stress (yours and your family members') in your later years. You need flexibility to use funds the way you need to, and a plan for funds to carry you well into your 90s.

***Hold family meetings and assign tasks and responsibilities* –** from the first time there's an issue with the elder person, talk regularly as a family about what's happening. Ask/demand that they all engage in the planning. People who don't see the elder person frequently (like a couple times a month) don't see gradual decline and if you don't tell them there are things wrong, they go about their lives. But over two or three months, a lot can go wrong.

- Figure out a comms schedule; maybe a semi-annual group zoom call that's not connected to a crisis. Go through a scorecard of sorts – health, mental state, financial picture, state of the house and cars – so the rest of the family knows what's happened, what's coming up, and discusses where they are able to provide research and decision-making relief.
- Assign tasks that don't require being in person. One of my brothers was responsible for shopping for an appliance when it broke. Lowes is Lowes is Lowes, no matter what city you live in.
- If a sibling or family member has a particular skill set, put them in charge of managing that area. One of my brothers is very mechanically adept. He could plan that on his 3x/year visits, he would specifically handle mechanical issues – check home mechanics, check out the cars, etc.
- Assign a call schedule for other family members to talk to the elder person. People get busy with their lives, and calls can be sporadic. For an elderly person, a scheduled weekly phone call makes a big difference. They're less lonely, they feel they are engaged with the family, and the calls take some of the emotional weight for that person off the primary care giver. If the call is scheduled, it's easy to think of 3 or 4 things to talk about. My brothers kvetched about this at first, but they found they appreciated the weekly conversations.

In short, be flexible, seek help, do your research, and engage advisors to develop the plans you'll need and family to relieve the stressors whenever possible.