

## 8/29/10 Sermon

"It's All About Your Spiritual Journey. What? It's Mine? "

Kim Palmer, Speaker

It was the day before Mother's Day, several years ago, when my mother called to tell me they had found a mass in her lung, and she was scheduled for a biopsy. "I didn't want to tell you tomorrow," she said, "and ruin your mother's day." Of course, it was the only thing I could think of, all through Mother's Day.

I canceled a work trip and flew up to be with her during the biopsy. My brother Randy came down as well. She was a difficult hospital patient, irritated at everyone and impatient with everything. She was released the next day, although it seemed like longer, and we took her home.

I think at this point it's important to describe the setting. My mother had never been a neat freak. The house had always been disorderly, and there had always been an accumulation of paper, as she stacked up magazines, newspapers, clippings, sales circulars, and the random flotsam and jetsam of life. But after my father died in 1984 and she lost his mitigating influence, the rate of chaos increased. And in recent years she had given up both cooking and entertaining, and the kitchen had virtually disappeared under a tsunami of paper.

My mother's routine in those last years was to have coffee in the morning, do a little work, which might entail making a phone call or two, paying some bills, or writing a letter, then take a nap on the couch until it was time to eat lunch at the Elks about a mile from her house. There, she would join up with her old lady friends, mostly other widows, and gossip about the goings-on in the Township and do a little harmless flirting with the elderly male cook.

After lunch, another nap on the couch, maybe another phone call, or go through the mail she had picked up while she was out. Sometimes a nap to get her to dinner, and then heat up her leftover lunch or a frozen meal in the microwave. Back to the couch to eat, watch a little TV, work some crossword puzzles, and then pull her feet up on the couch and lie back on the pillow she keeps on the armrest, and she's ready for the night.

Mom lived most of her life in those last years tottering between the kitchen and TV room. She went upstairs once a day, generally to shower and dress. But the clutter had taken over even there, with papers and various projects covering her bed, my old bed, every table, every chair, and random boxes of papers piled everywhere on the floors and in the closets.

There were only two places in the house that were clean – a formal living room where we entertained guests when I was young, and a guest room and associated bathroom at the top of the front hall stairs where guests sometimes stayed the night. It was absolutely off-limits to us when we were children, and those spaces were always to be kept uncluttered and pristine in case someone dropped by unexpectedly – they could be quarantined there and never be the wiser about the condition of the rest of the house. I think somewhere in my mother's limbic, reptilian brain stem, she viewed those two rooms as still somehow off-limits, even to her. My brother and I drew straws for who would sleep in the guest room and who would get the living room couch. My brother got the bed.

Cooking healthful meals for my mother was a challenge. First of all, she was picky, and overly critical. Second of all, there was nowhere – and I mean nowhere – to set anything down. The kitchen counter was covered with paper, mostly unopened junk mail, to a depth of about 10 inches. It extended all the way to one side to where it hung over one edge of the double sink, and all the way to the other side to where it covered the first two burners of the stove. We shoved that back so we could use the second two burners.

I made some simple meals by cutting ingredients directly into the pan – no room to set down a cutting board. When food was ready, Randy and I had to eat standing up. There was nowhere to sit in that house except for mom's end of the couch. Every chair was piled high with paper and junk. You couldn't just set it on the floor, because the floor was full except for the path to the kitchen or the bathroom. You couldn't just throw the stuff away because anything with her name or address on it had to be shredded, and each paper had to be sorted and then inspected by her to see if it were important, which of course many of them were.

Being in that house made the old tapes begin to run in my head, as it did for my brother, too. Why was she still in that house? Why hadn't she moved out after my father died? The place was a 1730's-era farmhouse with five bedrooms and four bathrooms on three acres. It had a three-car garage and an even larger workshop that was still full of my father's stuff. It had a slate roof and a damp basement, prone to flooding. The property was far too much for her to manage.

My brother and I had been trying for years to get her to sell it. He had hoped that mom would move to Boston, near him, and get to know her granddaughter while she was growing up, but she never did. I told her she could move to Atlanta and hang out on "our" couch, if she wanted a warmer, slower pace. Nothing doing. She stayed in that house and flushed money down an endless hole. It irritated us.

They built a small sewage plant down the street for some development going in and she screeched, "I can't sell this house if I'm still on a septic tank!" She got permission to hook into the system and paid \$17,000 for her share of building the plant and for running the sewer line all the way out to her house.

They redid the right-angle curve in the road and moved some of the telephone poles. Some extra wires ended up on the pole on her side. "I can't sell the house with those unsightly wires in the air!" she screeched. She paid \$12,000 to have the public wires along the roadway in front of her house buried so they wouldn't show. She didn't like the way the new roadway edge was graded around the new storm drain, so after the project was complete she hired a contractor and paid \$2,500 to have it re-graded. Then she paid another contractor to do it again because she didn't like the way it came out.

My brother and I would gnash our teeth at each new insanity. She was going to sue the Township because the Master Plan talked about developing a walking path along the creek behind her house and it would connect with something that would connect with something that would connect with a greenway that extended into Trenton, and the "CRIMINALS" from Trenton would walk 15 miles to her house and steal her TV, then carry it back to the ghetto along the walking path.

She was going to sue the painter because he had charged her \$15,000 to paint her house and then painted all the windows shut after she "TOLD HIM NOT TO!" Randy went around during our trip and confirmed that all the windows opened easily. She was 82 years old, under five feet and only 90 pounds; she just didn't have enough strength to lift those old, heavy sashes.

We thought it was crazy that she was living in that huge house, with it falling down around her ears. When stuff broke, she just stopped using it. When roof leaks got patched, she just left the discolored, peeling paint hanging in sheets from the ceiling; to us, they were unhappy reminders of the earlier glory of the house and its current state of entropy or decay, a reflection perhaps of her own aging process.

Her driving was erratic but we couldn't get her to listen about that. We couldn't get her to think about her future – where did she want to be as she continued to age? Didn't she want to move while she was still active, and set herself up in a new life? My brother and I were constantly irritated by her stubborn refusal to look at her situation.

Now the lump – actually, a lump in each lung, but a big lump in the left lung. As big as the top of a Coke can. "What if it's cancer?" Randy and I would say to each other. "She can't stay in this house."

We got the diagnosis a few days later. Cancer. After consultation with several trusted advisors, she agreed to get her treatment at Dana Farber Cancer Institute in Boston, and then spend time recuperating as needed at Randy's house in Boston until she was strong enough to return to her farmhouse in New Jersey. If she needed to be there for an extended time, she could see about getting an apartment up there.

Mom had her first evaluation appointments at Dana Farber to develop a treatment plan. She wasn't a candidate for lung surgery, so she began chemotherapy right away. She got chemo once every three weeks for six cycles. After chemo, a deep fatigue would set in, and she would spend the next 10 days or so on Randy's couch where they would bring her fluids and nibbles and make sure she got regular meals to regain her strength. As soon as she could stand on her own, she would insist on returning to New Jersey, where she would finish recuperating on her own couch, and then have about one normal week before coming back to Boston for the next cycle.

We couldn't understand why she was so desperate to escape us. As a family, we all got along, and actually enjoyed each other's company. My brother lived on a nice street that serves as a community for him much as UUMAN does for me. The neighbors all socialize regularly and have keys to each other's houses in case of emergency, and the next-door neighbor is like family. It's not unusual to come downstairs in the morning and see Eddie (the neighbor) in his bathrobe getting an egg out of the refrigerator because they're making pancakes and were one egg short. Mom would join the family on the patio with Eddie and Ceci every evening and she became folded into the pulse and fabric of life on Winslow Road. Why this insistence to drag herself back to New Jersey when she could barely stand upright? It all fed into the underlying irritation my brother and I felt about the choices she was making in dealing (or not dealing) with her illness.

As the months went by, she did finally agree that it might be time to think about finding a place to stay in the Boston area, in order to be able to recuperate with *visits* from the family but not actually displacing them from their own bedroom, as had been the case up to that point. She also worked herself around, with a steady stream of suggestion from us, to thinking that it might be time to put the house on the market.

That was full of its own challenges, as she had an unrealistic expectation of the value and thought the real estate agent, a friend of hers for many decades, was trying to rip her off, and she had some odd requirements, like that certain people in the township with whom she was in conflict were not allowed to set foot on the property.

This meant that the listing agent had to be present at each showing, to be gatekeeper, and that greatly reduced the number of showings. As it turned out, she also saw conspiracy everywhere, and she sabotaged offer after offer. Part of her problem was that she didn't trust anyone who had enough money to pay her asking price. She thought they were high-powered rich people, all lawyered-up and ready to steam-roll across her, the little guy. She was bristle-y and uncooperative with requests for information or when a buyer wanted to have their own inspectors in. She would say, "I told them that underground oil tank was removed with no problems. Why do they want to test the soil? Do they think I'm LYING???"

The real estate agent had the patience of Job as she watched deal after deal crumble in her hands. My mother seemed to think it was a game to see how clever and nasty she and her lawyer could be in their correspondence. Clearly, she didn't want to sell. In the meantime, she was paying an exorbitant rate for the largest apartment they had in a senior living facility in Boston, and complaining bitterly about the cost. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I burned through a couple of months of accumulated vacation time, going up to my mother's house for weeks at a stretch and trying to get it ready for sale, usually with the help of my sister-in-law. It was impossibly slow going. Everything had to be sorted and checked with my mother ... church bulletins from the 1960s when she was church secretary? "Oh no, you can't throw THOSE out! Those should go back to the church." How about these incorporation papers from when you tried to start an import/export with that guy from Ireland in 1972 but it never really went anywhere? "Oh no, you can't throw those out! I think I still owe him \$400. Save all that stuff." Sigh.

She had started the Historical Society in town, and there was a ton of stuff about that. Those papers would eventually have to go to the Society. She was active in the County Historical Society, too. Surely those newsletters could go? "Yes. No! You threw some away? Which of these 15 trash bags? We need to dig them back out." Argh!

While I was at my mother's house with her, I fell in to her routine. I took her to lunch at the Elks every day and to brunch at the Bistro with the brunch group on the weekends. At first those were painful trips. The ladies would recommend the chicken salad and then "*cluck-cluck-cluck*" when I got something else. They would tell me that the cook always gave them a slice of melon instead of potato chips, and then "*cluck-cluck-cluck*" when I got potato chips any way. Still, once my novelty wore off and I was accepted as one of them, I found the ladies to be delightful. They were spirited and full of life. They had a vibrant community, and gathering daily at the Elks was a ritual that kept these widows connected and engaged. I began to see why it

was so important to my mother to return here and remain a part of this.

Sorting through my mother's historical papers, I came across information about the history of her house as well as the history of Blawenburg, the small village in which she lived. Her house had been built by the founder of the town, John Blau, a Dutch immigrant. She had researched the property deeds back to the original titling of the land to the Blau family, and she had researched the Blau genealogy through many generations and many farmsteads and houses in our township. I found a number of newsletters from the National Blau [Blue] Family Association. She had been made an honorary member and the Association had held a Blau family reunion at her property in years past. When she died, a full-page obituary appeared in the newsletter, and I received heartwarming messages of condolence from members of the Blau clan.

I began to understand why she was so rooted to this place. Why she was so offended by the loss of the farmland around her, and the development of the "McMansions." Why she didn't want a walking path unceremoniously paved through her ancestral lands that had been passed to her from the hands that received them from the Indians.

Mom finished up her first course of chemotherapy and moved back to New Jersey, although she kept paying for (and complaining about) her apartment in Boston. She got about eight months, and then the cancer started growing again. She had another course of chemotherapy, again it was once every three weeks for six cycles, and again fatigue was the chief side effect. As before, she would drag herself back to New Jersey as soon as she was able. That put the cancer into abeyance only for another few months, and then when we started getting alarmed phone calls from my mother's friends, my brother drove to New Jersey for an intervention and brought mom back to Boston.

The cancer had spread very aggressively to the brain, and was also growing again in her chest. She was hospitalized for over a week to reduce the swelling in the brain and then released to a nursing home. The care facility we found for her was small, only 22 beds with only about half occupied, in an early 1800s farmhouse full of antiques, much like her own home. The hospital beds were wooden, and sections were raised and lowered by hand-crank. The shift nurses had been there for 14 and 20 years, respectively. It was perfect. I took a leave of absence and spent her last three months with her there, spending the days with her and sleeping at my brother's.

She let me hold on to her keys, and eventually let me start paying her bills, but wanted her car kept nearby where she could get to it if she needed it, and her checkbook stayed in her room. She made me take her out of that place every day, even if it was just to Target or to drive around. She said

she hated being stuck there with the other "inmates." She went from mobility to a walker to a wheelchair, and began using oxygen. Still she wanted to go out, slumped in the front seat of the car, gasping for breath. She kept in touch with her ladies until she didn't have enough breath to talk on the phone. She continued to plot her lawsuits, and left detailed instructions on where the materials were to continue fighting with her enemies.

She became bed-bound about four days before her death. She stopped eating shortly after that. She died with Randy, Caren and I in her room. I was holding her hand.

Lest you think this is a sad story, I want to assure you that this was a life to celebrate, and in those final years and months I grew to appreciate its rich texture. She lived exactly as she chose, and she was uncompromising to the end. She viewed the cancer as an inconvenience, nothing more. She may have been in denial, or she may have not realized that her condition was terminal. Or she may have known exactly what the situation was, and simply chosen to ignore it. She had her life set up exactly the way she wanted it, and she lived the way she wanted, as much as she was able, right up until her last days.

When she was first diagnosed with cancer, I had the arrogance to think that this was an opportunity for her – an opportunity to let go of the petty concerns and enmities that had consumed her, and to re-prioritize her life to make use of her remaining time on those things that were "really" important: family, reconciliation, finding peace, releasing bitterness. I thought this would be her opportunity for spiritual growth.

However, none of those things happened – she stayed exactly the same, with her same priorities and patterns of behavior and living. Much to my surprise, I found that it was "I" who received the experience of spiritual growth.

Rather than her coming around to my point of view of what was important for her life, I came to understand her life from her perspective. I came to see what was important for her, and why it had so much value. I came to appreciate her dedication to the things that mattered to her, and to admire her for sticking to it, even when she was uncomfortable and ill; even when she was at the point of death. She may not have made the choices in life that I would have made for her, but I came to understand and appreciate why she made the choices she made, and to respect that they had value for her.

I find two important life lessons here. One is not to judge – for years I had pooh-poohed my mother’s reluctance to leave her house as simple stubbornness. I had not taken the time to learn enough about her perspective to understand the depth of meaning that home had for her. It was more than just a 40-year habit. We must be careful not to ascribe motivations to others for their actions when we do not know their whole story. We should not assume we know their story simply because they are our relatives.

Secondly, we must be open to spiritual growth when it finds us. It may come from an unexpected source. I came to help my mother clean her house, move to Boston, make it through chemo, and move through her last months of life. My mother was a difficult, critical, demanding personality and I expected my time with her to be challenging and thankless. What I got was a window to her world that enriched my life and my relationship with her, provided me with a deeper connection to my own history and sense of place, and two priceless years of connection that were filled with not only her criticism but also her gratitude, and her expressions of love and caring as she was able to make them. I learned more patience than I ever thought possible and, by the time of her death, I found that all resentment from those earlier years had melted away, and only my appreciation of her as a complex, richly textured and whole person remained.

As one additional gift from that time, I returned home from my three months in the nursing home to find that work in Corporate America felt a bit flat. Some soul-searching led me to the conclusion that I was called into ministry, to pursue a vocation as a chaplain. I begin life as a seminary student tomorrow, a fitting tribute to my mother and her influence.

Opportunities for learning abound. As we remain open to the lessons of life, we may find that with wonder and awe, we move through life’s most interesting journey of all – the journey of the spirit.

Blessed be.