

Chapter 1

Becoming the Adult Your Parent Needs

Getting Mad and Getting Even with Death in the ICU

Los Angeles Daily News - August 15, 1999



Mom and me after her surgery.

I called the hospital and was put through to the intensive care waiting room. My dad answered. I knew immediately something was terribly wrong. He told me Mom had a heart attack during the surgery. He didn't know where she was. No one was telling him anything. What was going on?

When I arrived at the hospital the next day the doctors told us they were worried. They never say that. When the doctor worries, family members panic. Mom was surrounded by "spaghetti," with enough tubes and wires to power a small city. None of us knew if she would make it.

I stood by her side, leaning over the bed rail, and talked and talked. She was unconscious but it didn't matter; the nurses said it would help. The next day things got worse. My mother was reduced to a mass of hourly readings: heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure. And then it got worse.

The doctor said she needed a sigmoidoscopy. He thought some of her tissue might have died during the heart attack due to lack of oxygen. He wanted to go in and take pictures. Knowing what she was in for, I asked that I be allowed to stay with her during the procedure.

I searched for the right words to comfort her. With her mouth taped shut, tubes sprouting from both wrists, forearms, and even her abdomen, and now a nasty tube going into her guts, I asked Mom if she would like me to swear for her.

Her lids lifted and our eyes locked. She nodded, yes. I began to swear like a sailor in loud and confident tones.

To this day, I don't know why I offered to cuss for her at that moment. I can count on the fingers of one hand the times I heard my mother swear. We kids knew that if Mom swore, something was terribly wrong.

I knew something was terribly wrong in the Cardiac Intensive Care Unit as the physician performed a painful procedure on my mother after she had endured forty-eight hours on life support following seven grueling hours of surgery.

We fought together, the two of us. I voiced her frustration in loud, vibrant tones. We weren't complaining, we weren't even praying. We were fighting for survival in the best way we knew how; not by cowing and crying but by crowing and proclaiming in colorful street language the indignation my mother felt but was unable to express.

Mom made it through the procedure, through the night, through the fever, and yet another agonizing day on life support. On the morning of the fourth day, she opened her eyes and smiled. My father, sister, and I jumped for joy, so much so that the Intensive Care nurse asked us to leave until we calmed down.

Six years later my mother is going strong. She tells me often that my swearing got her through her ordeal. Perhaps other moms would have benefited from prayers or poetic platitudes from their children at a time when they swung between life and death. For my mom and me, getting mad and getting even with death did the trick.

The nasty words she felt like saying a thousand times but did not, in the interest of raising decent children, were expressed at a time when they helped her cope, in a place where such words could express her frustration, by a daughter who wanted with all her might for her mom to come back.