

Woman

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WOMAN SENSE

A healthy bond carries daughter, mom past illness



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My mom had a stroke just over a year ago. Not a day goes by that I don't think about it, how it suddenly came and left this articulate, energetic lady unable to walk, hard to understand and exhausted. It was as if a tornado whirled through Mom's brain.

Luckily, her mental capacity and memory were not touched. In fact, while convalescing at Baylor University Medical Center, Mom helped a nurse finish a crossword puzzle. Many families weren't so lucky.

"It's heartbreaking, isn't it?" Mom would say about the young accident victims we saw in physical therapy. Then she'd whisper, "Did you see me? I did four laps!" Little things, such as dressing oneself, became large achievements. "Buttercup" was a word Mom had to work hard to say clearly. Getting well was work, and Mom was a trouper.

I'm the middle of three daughters of Barbara and Al Silberberg. We all reacted differently to the stroke. My sisters were cheerful and helpful. I flew in from my home outside Washington, D.C., and had every intention of being stoic and strong for Mom. Before I left D.C., my cousin, Cindy, advised me to be upbeat. "Smile when you see your mother. If you feel like you're going to cry, leave the room." This became my mantra.

So there I was at Baylor, and nothing could have prepared me. When I walked in, Mom smiled and tried to talk. Even now I choke up at the thought of this moment. But then I remembered my mantra. No crying. No crying. For about 48 hours I was good.

My sisters and I took turns at the hospital. I had the afternoon shift. About the third day, Mom and I sat quietly: she in the bed surrounded by flowers and funny cards and me in a chair by her side. She turned toward me and saw me watching her.

"Allison."

"What?"

"You're staring at me."

"No I'm not," I said as tears welled up.

"Yes you are, and with those bassett-hound eyes." And she imitated my look. "I know it's hard, but please stop staring at me."

I shrugged. I knew she was right.

"Can't help it." Now I began to cry and covered my face in my hands.

And then, for the first time since the stroke, Mom and I had one of our heart-to-heart talks. "I worry about you," she struggled to say.

"Me? You're the one."

"I'll be all right," she said sympathetically.

Now I've done it, I thought. She's consoling me. I'm terrible at this. Cindy's gonna kill me.

"Don't you know how lucky I've been? If this is it, I've had a great life. A great life. I love your father, and I love you three girls. I'm OK if this is it. I hope I survive this, but if not, I'm OK. But I worry about you. I know the others will be OK, but you've got to be stronger."

Mom and I had long ago ceased being only mother/daughter; we had become friends, close friends.

I stood up and went to the foot of the bed and said quietly, "Now you listen to me. It's all well and good to be at peace with things, but you've got to have courage. Do you think Jack Kennedy gave up when they read the last rites to him three times? And FDR. Do you think he gave up? No, they both went on to become president!"

"But I'm not running for president."

"It's the same thing. Think about their courage. You fight! You fight for Dad. You fight for my sisters. You fight for me. And you fight for yourself. But most of all, you fight for little Katie and Robert!"

With tears in her eyes, Mom looked confused and said, "But who are Katie and Robert?"

"My children!" I bellowed.

"But you don't have any children."

"Well, some day," I said.

"Katie and Robert are your unborn children? You've picked out names?!"

We laugh about this moment now, but Mom knows how I feel, and I think that's the point: that she knows. I still get choked up now and then when I watch her limp slightly on her way to the kitchen, but her recovery is nothing less than remarkable. I'm really quite proud of her courage. And I think deep down so is she.

And so our lives are about hope, loss and recovery. She still edits my writing before anyone else, still sends me little gifts for no reason, and still calls to share insights about current events and movies to check out. And me, I carry on. God, I'm lucky.

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