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Death Don't Have No Mercy

A Memoir of a Mother's Death

BY MARIANA CAPLAN

*Well Death will go in any family in this land
Well Death will go in every family in this land
Well he'll come to your house and he won't stay long
Well you'll look in the bed and one of your family will be gone
Death will go in any family in this land*

FROM "DEATH DON'T HAVE NO MERCY," BY REV. GARY DAVIS

NOT MANY OF US have seen another person receive a death sentence. Fewer still have been present to watch their own mother be given the final verdict.

I had returned just days before from Asia. Ironically, the intention of the trip was to sit at the famous cremation grounds of Varanasi in India and in Pashpatinath in Nepal, where funeral pyres have burned for thousands of years. I was trying to face death as intimately as possible, to take the next step in a lifetime struggle to come to terms with my ultimate fate. A Jew by birth, I had been practicing for a decade under the guidance of Lee Lozowick in the Western Baul tradition, a rare synthesis that combines Vajrayana Buddhism with the devotional ecstasy of Vaisnava Hinduism, adapted to the needs of the contemporary Western practitioner.

I engaged my experiment well, bearing witness to the death and decomposition of the body. I had contemplated death nearly every day of my life since the age of four, and such close exposure was somehow comforting—until it was my own mother who was about to disappear forever from my life.

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Photo opposite: Cimitero Staglieno, Genoa, Italy, 1992. © Marcia Lippman



MY MOTHER HAD NOT BEEN feeling well while I was in India, and I knew I must visit her.

The day after I arrived we went to the hospital: my mother, my father, and I, a combination that hadn't occurred in at least a decade. The doctor came in with my mother's test results. He told her that while they had hoped her cancer had stemmed from the ovaries, in fact it was sourced in the pancreas.

In that moment, I saw something dreadful flash across my mother's face, something that even a woman who had mastered the art of concealing pain could not hide. I did not know what or where the pancreas was, or that cancer stemming from that part of the body represented almost certain death, but the look told all. I was watching my mother sentenced to death, which would come much sooner for her than for those sentenced to death by any court. It was a death she did not want and was not prepared for, and it was coming far too quickly to bring with it any reasonable chance of acceptance.

"What is the average life expectancy for pancreatic cancer?" she stuttered, her training in pseudo-strength regrouping itself with amazing rapidity.

"We think in terms of months rather than years," the doctor replied.

THERE WERE MOMENTS when I couldn't help feeling it was unfair that I would be motherless by the age of thirty-one. By the time you lost a parent you were supposed to have a family of your own—a husband to support you through it and the demands of children to fill the empty space. You were supposed to have matured into adulthood. You were supposed to be better prepared somehow. Your parents were supposed to have felt they had lived a full life, had drunk deeply from experience. Death was supposed to be a natural and expected consequence of a life fully lived.

Intellectually, I knew there were many who had it worse than I did—who had lost one or both parents at a young age to accidents or early cancer. My mother herself had lost a mother, a sister, and a brother by the time she was twenty-seven. My circumstance was hardly unique, and yet it was not the norm. People my age who had lost a parent were the exception. Everyone else seemed to have a mother.

Day by day, the inventory of loss surprised me with its accumulating detail. My mother would not be at my wedding when I finally married, the fantasy we had shared since I was six. There would be no mother to call and tell that I was pregnant. No grandma. No too-many-gifts for the baby. No one I could go to later to say, "Now I understand what you went through with me. I am so sorry."

Yet she had kept a sacred vow she had made to me many years earlier. Because of it I trusted I would have the strength to carry me through. She had promised me she would not die until I was old enough to be able to under-

stand, to be okay with it. Twenty-seven years earlier, when I had first found out about death, when I had been told that I and everyone I loved would eventually die, I sobbed through endless nights, first for my own death, then for my mother's, and then for everyone else's. It was then she had promised me she would not die before I was ready.

I did not feel, as my brother did, that we had been wronged in some way. I could not allow myself the indulgence of thinking, If there is a God, how could he do this? I knew the Lord of Death was the same as the Lord of Birth. Still, there is something indescribably personal and intimate when the most common thing that ever happens in the universe happens to you.

I DIDN'T KNOW that hell had so many doors, so many rooms, so many details, so many different people in it. My brother arrived at the hospital shortly after the doctor had pronounced the verdict—my cherished big brother, my childhood hero, who loved his mother so—and there in the sterile white hall outside the elevator I told him his mother would die and we held each other and cried, without consolation. Later we tracked down my estranged brother in Cambodia, and still later watched my mother, half-dazed, bravely pick up the telephone and call her younger brother and sister-in-law and her closest girlfriends. We watched her see her young grandchildren for the first time after receiving such news, watched her trying to comprehend that she was not going to see these young people who were the light of her life grow up. There is no story more universal than this one, nor one more unique and singular.

Just when I thought it could not get worse, an uninvited guest arrived: the demon of denial. The first round of phone calls had been completed, the first shock waves passed, and my mother was puttering around the house. She had recouped some of her energy and we were acting as though nothing had happened. We were living in a fictional world where ideas of how we were supposed to feel replaced real feelings, and a logical understanding about the inevitability of death replaced the human sorrow of impending parting. We were all playing a make-believe game called "Let's Pretend Mom Isn't Dying."

People who study death from a spiritual and psychological perspective know that to respect another's dignity we must allow them to die the way *they* choose to, and not how we believe they should. While this philosophy is easy to adopt theoretically, the righteous meditator and psychotherapist in me wanted to insist, "But this is your final chance to lift the dark veils of denial. To finally face all that is repressed and say 'yes' to everything within you. To forgive yourself and everyone you imagine has wronged you. To use the last great opportunity while alive to understand life itself." But I knew I must remain silent.

Finally, as I prepared to return to my own home in the Bay Area, I sat down to spend the last few minutes with her, not

knowing if these would be the last. Instead of sitting down with me, my mother took out her comb, fixed her hair, and used her small bit of remaining energy to put away some things in the kitchen. I could not blame her for choosing distracting activity to numb the pain and sorrow of yet another goodbye. How many times can you bear it? It is agonizing to do even once. For how do you say a final goodbye to your mother? The many times you rejected her, pushing her away to gain your independence, you knew she was still there keeping the hearth warm. But now you have to say goodbye forever. Each time I left to return to California I was sure it was the last time I would see her alive. Each time I left I bore witness to the degree of pain it is possible for the human heart to feel.



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ON TRIPS TO SEE HER as the months progressed, I watched my mother lose one aspect of herself after another. All spiritual tradition tells us that we are not our bodies and that suffering is caused by an illusory misidentification with the body. Yet, in the face of death, such teachings are likely to yield only a vague intellectual consolation at best.

Within seven months, my mother lost one freedom after another: first, the freedom to drive, then to participate in creative action to affect the world, then to go out at all. She soon lost the ability to walk, and shortly after, the gift of hunger disappeared. I remember the two of us standing in front of the bathroom mirror as she commented, with a mix of irony and humor, that after thirty years of dieting she had finally achieved her desired weight.

I watched her measure each bit of remaining energy and determine its best use, relinquishing the attachment first to old friends, then to relatives, then to the dog, and finally even to the grandchildren, until only husband, children, and her own body remained. I lay by her side and watched these gifts being taken from my mother day by day, sometimes hour by hour, asking myself, where was God's mercy? I knew it must be there, only I could not fathom its logic.

Sometime before she died she was lying on the couch one afternoon while I knelt on the floor beside her, holding her hand. I cannot say exactly when it was, because measuring time is not important when you are hanging out with death so intimately. The only reason to keep track of time at all is to ensure that enough morphine is provided. Weather doesn't matter. Missed meetings don't matter. Parties and new furniture and computer problems—all the things we normally obsess over—don't matter. All that matters is the



Top: Mollie Glaser Caplan; left, Mariana Caplan; above: Mollie and Mariana gardening, Potomac, Maryland, 1971.

love that exists between people, the capacity to bear the physical and emotional weight of death, and the nature of one's spiritual practice.

On this particular day we were talking about death in one of our rare moments of shared relaxation and acceptance. Suddenly a visual morphing took place and I saw what it must have been like for her, when she was even younger than I was, to sit just like this, in the house only a few miles away where she was raised, holding her mother's hand while she was dying. How quickly those years must have passed, and it would be but a blink of an eye before I would be lying on a similar couch somewhere, and my still unborn child would be sitting there with me, bearing the most difficult life lessons as well.

I shared my thought with her, and she said, "Mariana, there are so few things in life that really matter." She was talking of the ordinary causes of our worry and stress—a gray hair, a broken-down vehicle, a wrinkle, a steep mortgage, a lost job, a misunderstanding. It is not that such

things don't need to be *lived*, and lived fully and completely. But instead of allowing them to pass with undramatic acceptance and recognizing the opportunities they offer us, we become their captive, foregoing precious moments to live fully the life we are given.

I RECEIVED A CALL from my aunt saying that I should come soon. I caught the next plane east, wondering if this was indeed the time. When I arrived, I expected that she would be there, very weak but still conscious, and that I would try to embrace further the combination of agony and profound communion that had come to characterize the experience of being with her. Yet there was nothing that could have prepared me for what I felt that evening.

I walked into her room and knelt near her bed to say hello. Her body was there, but her limbs had begun to curl and whiten, no longer able to function. The suffering of the body had gone past the point of no return and had taken the identity of "mother" with it. *She* was still there, but she was no longer wife, mother, grandmother, sister, caretaker, philanthropist, Jew, gardener, homemaker, nature-lover. All were gone. Left was a still-breathing body with consciousness and a dwindling life force. Some distant remnants of personality remained buried beneath the torrents of pain continually assaulting her body. Her soul, her essence, her suffering body were there. But my mother was not. I was an orphan, experiencing my first moments on earth as a motherless child.

My heart broke. I could feel it physically, and I was stunned by the degree of breakage that can happen to the human heart. It was not "awful," because there was no value judgment to be placed upon it. It was far too true to be right or wrong. It simply was.

I think that most of what we call heartbreak is really a heart bruise, or perhaps a sprain or rupture. It is a heart contracted in fear or sorrow, or a heart pressured by the expansion of suffering. Only rarely does the heart actually break, and when it happens, you know exactly what it is.

There is a kind of pain for which there is no consolation. Ironically, it does not mean that all in life is lost. Far from it. A true acceptance of inconsolable pain means that we no longer need live our lives constructing false personalities

and finding conscious and unconscious ways to protect our hearts from being broken. To allow ourselves to live heart-broken is to be freed from having to shield ourselves from life. We are totally vulnerable, offered to the mercy of life to do with us what it will. We are released *into* life.

THE NEXT SIX NIGHTS, the final ones of my mother's life, I alternated sleeping next to her, my back pressed against the steel bars of the hospital bed with my arms holding her, and



The author (right), her mother Mollie (left), and her niece Annie, about two months before Mollie's death.

lying on the floor to stretch my back and distance myself for a few moments from the suffering I felt lying beside her. Often I would awake from a few minutes of sleep to the sound of her choking, and grab the plastic container to catch the green and brown bile she was vomiting. If I didn't get there quickly enough, I would clean her up. Sometimes I would awaken to her moans and take her into my arms as though she were my sweet, dying child, talking to her softly long into the night. "It will pass. All things do. I am here. I am here. You are not suffering alone. It may not feel like it, but love is at the base of everything. You are loved. I love you. You are loved."

I did not know one could grow that quickly. Through sheer necessity, resources of strength I had not known kept revealing themselves to me. In such circumstances one suddenly understands the valiant acts of bravery performed in the face of tragedies and disasters as a force that comes *through* a human being as a consequence of love for another. It is not noble. It is nothing to be proud about. It is not personal at all. It is simply a necessity. Such awareness takes the remaining pieces of the broken heart and grinds them into sand.

I HEAR A LOT OF STORIES about peaceful deaths, leaving one to believe that most people die completed, at great peace. I've heard people say that so-and-so died without pain, at ease, that there was a kind of ethereal quality in the room, that there was a small smile on their face, suggesting great serenity and a graceful passing. Maybe those are the only types of deaths people really talk about.

The other kind, which are probably most, are both terribly difficult to digest and taboo to discuss. You don't go out for dinner with someone and hear about how someone's anger or attachment or fear was blown up to an unimaginable degree at the time of his or her death, and that the person left struggling all the way. People don't talk about such things, but I think they should, because it might help us to avoid the kind of death my mother experienced. Her inability to let go in life caught up with her as she was dying. The very cells of her body were programmed to hang on, to control, to resist, even when it was time to finally let go.

The day before she died, there was a sudden pris-

I kept vigil, determined to love her and stay by her side to the last. I began to wonder if I was demonstrating love or simply attachment. I wondered if her bond with her daughter, my continued comforting of her, was keeping her alive past the lawful moment. I made a decision that was one of the most difficult I have made in my life. I spoke firmly to her heaving body, and to any spirit that remained, saying that I indeed loved my mother but that I could no longer support her enduring that much suffering. I told *it*, for it no longer felt like her, that I would sit there and offer presence and space but that I would distance myself emotionally and support it only to know that it must leave. It was the kind of gesture one can make authentically only in desperation. And so I sat there for the next day, holding vigil but now from the other bed, tending to my father's wish that I write her obituary so that something nice would appear in the paper.

How we know what we know in such moments is incomprehensible. We are plunged into another world, foreign yet intimately familiar, and operate under rules known only by our souls.

I told her, "Let go. Let go into love. Please, release yourself completely."
It was the best way I knew to love my mother.

ing within her. She had not moved or spoken for days, and suddenly her arms and upper chest rose up from the bed. She began to flail and moan, using all of her remaining strength to battle demons that surely exist, though not in a reality most of us live in. Her face registered a look of someone being beaten and slain, fighting for her life. Hesitating to enter a battlefield I could not see, I nevertheless approached her, put my hand on her shoulder, and began to comfort her as best I could.

My father, who was nearby, spoke to me firmly and told me to let her be. As I had always been rebellious, I had rarely listened to him, but this time he was right. In that moment he was a true father to me and husband to his wife. I backed off and let her fight her own battle. Finally, after an exhausting struggle, she lay down again to rest. Her defeat seemed certain and we expected her death within moments.

But she did not die. The body went on, and something eerie and deeply disturbing ensued. It was as if the wrathful entity of Resistance, the embodiment of control, stubbornness, fight itself—the Great NO—inhabited her body. It was as if the soul of my mother departed, leaving behind a dark entity occupying an empty, heaving shell of a body. When her grandchildren came in to visit her that afternoon, they ran with terror from the room, as did their mother. My brother, her own son, could hardly tolerate being in her presence.

THE DAY MY MOTHER DIED the regular nurse was off duty, and a replacement came instead. The notable feature of this woman was that, although by practical standards she was simply a good Christian and a middle-aged mother, she had a particular reputation: those who were stuck, unable to let go into death, would often make the transition upon her visit. She did not *do* anything to make this happen, or if she did it was intuitive and secretive. It just happened. She was an angel of death.

She came in and took my mother's pulse and vitals. The body was heaving, beginning to reek of death, though still alive. She said that my mother would die that day, probably within several hours. Then, as we sat by the bed and talked, she glanced over at my mother's body and said, "I was wrong. She is likely to die within two hours." Then, a few minutes later, "She will die within an hour." Then, "She will die within the next twenty minutes." And finally—the whole conversation taking place in less than thirty minutes: "She will die within the next few minutes. Whoever wants to be here should come."

I resumed my familiar spot, lying between her body and the bars of the hospital bed. My brother and sister-in-law came in and began the usual litany: "You were the best mother. I don't want you to die. I love you, Mom." Their words were loving and understandable, but I feared they were not what she needed. Communicating to her silently

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but as clearly as I could, hoping to override the voice of their sentimentality, I told her, “Let go. Let go. Let go into Love. Surrender into God. Don’t worry about us. Leave us wholly and release yourself completely into the Light. Please, release yourself completely.” It was the best way I knew to love my mother.

SUDDENLY, IT ALL STOPPED. She had been suffering and clinging for what seemed an eternity. Then suddenly, she was gone.

There was no plan for that moment. There was no map to guide us. It was over. She was gone. We were all there and she was not and there was an emptiness so stark and wide that it seemed the whole world could fit into it. It went beyond the mind’s imagining. How inconceivable a God that could create a heart capable of bearing such vast emptiness. The only mercy of those moments was the near-smile on her face after the breath left. The expression was that of a human being free from all tensions of incarnation, all pains of body and mind released.

I saw from the way my mother died that perhaps the best preparation one can make to avoid such a death is to practice surrendering in life. This is much of the purpose of spiritual practice: to learn—consciously, mentally, emotionally, physically—to let go. This learning can take place through service of all kinds: through mothering a child and learning to place another’s needs and preferences above your own; through being a truly loving partner who makes conscious sacrifices for the well-being of the other; through the sacrifice of spiritual discipline in which one learns to persist in the face of preferences and resistance; to be no longer enslaved to the powerful forces of greed, lethargy, and craving.

There are thousands of moments each day in which we are offered the opportunity to practice surrendering to what is: to the traffic keeping us from an appointment, to another’s suffering, to an unpleasant

thought, to the many things that do not go the way we would like them to. All of these moments provide an opportunity to engage life in the moment, surrendering to it as it is, as well as preparing for death and the call for final surrender.

The moment of death will come all too soon. Whether it is a month or ten years or forty years from now, suddenly I will be the one who is on the deathbed. I will be making the choice to die unconsciously and hope for the best, or to look squarely into the unknown and jump, without waiting to be pushed.

I will not want to die, of this I am certain, but if I am fortunate enough to be fully conscious in that moment, may I die with dignity and elegance. May I bid farewell to the people around me in love and blessing, call trustingly upon my God for support, and then, as the precise moment draws near, go to the place where I am not separate from the universe, and let go.

If I am taken by sudden trauma, may I have finally learned to react with something more conscious than, “*Oh, shiiiiit,*” or the childhood imprint of, “*Mommy!!!,*” bringing instead some name of God to my lips, perhaps even briefly chuckling that I have returned to being a Jew in my final moments, then rapidly adjusting myself to the mood of radical acceptance.

If pain and illness have overcome me so my attention is dispersed, may I find a moment of complete acceptance, fully allowing God’s ravishment of my body. If my condition at that time is senility or sleep, or if the process of disease has demolished my conscious identity, may I have acquired a lifetime of habits based on intention and merit so that surrender, rather than grasping, will guide my passage. May the unconscious and dark forces within have been owned and received so that no hidden demons arise at that moment.

And if I must die young, may I die boldly, in an exemplary manner, having lived so fully that my life is complete already; having lived free from all compromise, knowing what it is to forgive and to accept. May I know no regret. May I die saying YES. ♦