

Chapter 1: The Dying

Is there a clear moment that you can say “My mother is dying?” The phrase “is dying” can echo brutally along the canyons of a child’s heart; many are reluctant to verbalize the words. Some have been outraged to learn of a mother’s death: “No one told me she was dying!” Some refuse to hear the diagnosis. Some thought their mother had nine lives; she had beaten other diagnoses, surely she would conquer this one, too. Mom is invincible! In one sense, we are dying the moment we take our first breath, and we are living until we take our last breath. Some daughters and sons say the words “is dying” so softly in conversations one can hardly hear it. In other families, the reality is never acknowledged.

Ask me, Sudden death or lingering suffering?
Tonight I’ll take “didn’t know what hit her!”
Tomorrow I’ll rethink it.
I can’t think rationally
I’m too weary
I’m too emotionally unsettled
by my inability to do anything
other than sit here
waiting for something to happen.

The Beginning of the Ending

Some readers can identify with Malcolm Boyd’s experience: “Years passed when I took my mother’s good health and sense of security for granted. How was I to know that a sudden crisis would shatter this condition and well-being?” At the moment the ambulance backed down the driveway, Beatrice Boyd was not dying but, in her son’s mind, “it became clear that she would never see her house again.”⁴ It was another mile marker on a death path. All of us know our mothers will die—none of us believe it.

I watched my mother die. As I watched her suffer, I agonized. I composed prayers that I could not have imagined uttering. Late one night, I scribbled a prayer of petition for my mother’s death. I could not stand to witness such suffering.

Lord, take my mother, please!
Take her to be with you and Dad.
End her pain now!
Jesus, you never had to watch your mother die.
What I am witnessing
is enough to soften the heart
of the hardest-hearted son.
Give her a boarding pass.

I felt overwhelmed with guilt! I had prayed for my mother to die. After some dark moments, I reminded myself that I had prayed for the suffering to end. Death was the only way her suffering could end.

The end began with a physical and mental evaluation of my mother. Clearly, she could not live by herself. The first stop was Rose Anna Hughes, an assisted-living facility—a challenge for my mother. After decades of living in her own home, sharing a small room and a bathroom with strangers was demanding if not demeaning. The first time I walked into her room I thought, “This isn’t my mother. I’ve mixed up the

room numbers.” Then for some reason I called out, “Mom?” “Oh, is that you, Honey?” The voice had not changed. I was in my mother’s room. How could she have changed so dramatically since the last time I had seen her? I would have walked past her in a hallway. That was only the beginning of my walk in the long shadowed valley. Soon there would be complications from a broken hip, and skirmishes with incompetent administrators and staff, including one who knocked my mother down because she wasn’t walking fast enough. I will never forget finding my mother lying naked on her bed, the door to the hall wide open. The nursing assistant did not have everything she needed to change her, so she had left Mom exposed. I was outraged. “I want the administrator here now!” I bellowed. When a nurse’s aide asked what was wrong, another “Now!” convinced her to find an administrator. I telephoned my sister. “I am at the nursing home. Mom is laying here stark naked and no one is around!” A few minutes later my sister arrived. Like tag-team wrestlers on cable TV, we demanded immediate change in mother’s care.

My mother had always been modest.
To find her naked and dependent
on the kindness of poorly paid strangers
was an emotional tsunami which repeatedly
slammed the shoreline of my heart.

Soon an administrator arrived. My mother was changed, clothed, and sitting on her bed. How do you have a conversation about what just happened? I knew that she knew. I also knew that I could not guarantee that it would never happen again.

Having had three years to reflect on Mom’s dying, I envied Fergus Bordewich’s experience: “I was grateful in a way that I had never seen her grow old, never seen her eyes dull, her flesh sag, her memory disintegrate, her optimism falter.”⁵ I had seen more than a son should ever see. Then came that God-awful day when my mother waited in agitation for an aide to come take her to the bathroom. Wanting to calm her, I began reading Bible verses she had long appreciated. She pressed the call button repeatedly, her eyes darting from me to the doorway as I read from Lamentations: “The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness” (3:22-23). My mother whispered, “We used to sing a song about that.” “Yes, Mom, we did. ‘Great Is Thy Faithfulness.’” I began singing and soon she joined me.

Great is thy faithfulness,
Great is thy faithfulness,
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed Thy hand has provided
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord unto me.⁶

As Mother began the second verse, I became aware that she had not been able to hold her bowels. While she filled her diaper, we sang about God’s faithfulness. Eventually an aide came and changed my mother. My mother knew that I knew she had dirtied her diaper. Another piece of her fragile dignity had been stripped away. Later in the parking lot I screamed at God. “Faithfulness! She is sitting there filling her diapers and yet she is singing about your ‘faithfulness’ to her! What kind of life is this?” Throughout lunch I struggled with the morning’s events. Yet, the real sandpaper on my heart was fear that someday I may sit dirtying myself in a nursing facility. Only there will not be a son sitting with me reading Lamentations or singing about the faithfulness of God. Watching a mother die can stir up anguishing fears and fantasies. Reeve Lindbergh writes:

Looking in the morning mirror, I ask myself, What is that face that I see? How did I get here from childhood? A fifty-four-year-old woman with glasses and wrinkles, brooding about her confused ninety-three-year-old mother in diapers. This is not what I asked for! This is not where I wanted to be.