

## Reflections - Paul

I adored my mom. She was my rock. We led very independent lives from each other, but we tended to talk on the phone every week or so. And in her latter years of life, especially after my dad died in 2019, we would connect sometimes every few days.

I have not lived a conventional US life. Entirely by choice. I have been self-employed and living lightly since my 20s. This gave me incredible freedom to travel when I wanted to, to focus on social change work in a variety of places, and most importantly (for this essay) to visit my parents often. I cherished my relationship with my parents.

I told my mom many years ago that because of my work choices, I could be available on very short notice to take care of her in her home, for extended periods, whenever needed.

Mom and I tended to deeply enjoy our time together, whether cooking or baking, taking walks and long sits in lovely natural settings, watching movies and TV shows, or going out for meals. Even shopping together for groceries always felt like a special time with my mom. I loved being in service to her.

When mom broke her hip and fell in her kitchen in August 2019, she ended up in a rehab center for many months, doing intensive physical therapy just to be able to walk again. I let her know, early on, that if she wanted me to stay with her for an extended period of time once she was back in her own home, that I would gladly do so. She asked, and I was there.

She had also just suffered a pair of strokes, so she really had to work hard to get some semblance of her old life back. It was amazing to watch her go! For her first weeks back at home, she seemed to have constant visits from physical therapists, speech therapists, writing therapists, and other support people. She didn't much like all of these visitors insisting that she had to really work if she wanted her full life back, but she mostly did the work, and recovered beautifully. Everything except being able to write long letters, which was one of mom's greatest joys. This loss took a great toll on her.

Almost till the day she died, she was still reaching out to connect to people she cared about. In her final week of being awake and lucid, she demanded (not requested but demanded) that I write down the names of five particular neighbors on her street, and commit to visiting all of them promptly to let them know that she wished she had gotten to know them better, and to apologize to them for not being able to say a proper farewell.

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Mom and I were not always so emotionally close. As a child, I found myself swinging back and forth numerous times over many years, between my mom and my dad, in terms of where I placed my primary parental loyalty.

For much of my childhood and teen years, my father and I had more natural affinity than did my mother and I. Dad and I would go hiking together on weekends, play basketball after his workday ended, have long talks laying side by side on my parents' bed. We were both very political creatures. Both radical thinkers. And that conversation grew and deepened, right up until his elder years.

Whereas my mother and I didn't have as natural a connection. She kept herself very busy when she was home with us. Neither of my parents were very good at playing with their kids. They were both pretty darn serious people. But I still had enormous respect for who she was in the world. Mom made sure that our family's home life felt solid. For example, the four of us rarely missed sitting down together for a mom-cooked dinner almost every evening of my childhood, which shocked and amazed my friends, none of whom had that experience growing up. Mom put a lot of time and energy into creating a stable home environment for us.

It wasn't all roses. There were many messy dynamics at play in my family. For example, neither of my parents were very attentive to the vicious bullying I experienced throughout my pre-teen years. I regularly begged them for help, which was mostly ignored. Mom would tell me in later years that parents didn't actively participate in their children's emotional lives back then, like they do today. She expressed deep regret to me that she had been so inattentive.

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When I went off to college, and continuing in the years and decades that followed, I started telling my mom that I wanted more emotional intimacy with her. That I wanted to know her a lot better than I did. That I was an adult now, and that she and I could have more of an adult to adult relationship, if only she would allow it to unfold. Mom was quite resistant at first, but I kept nudging. And in the decades that followed, we became closer and closer and closer.

I mentioned this last bit of our history to my mom just a month or so before she died. She had no recollection of this, or of the slow transformation of our mother and son relationship, but she did acknowledge how much she loved our emotional closeness and mutual sense of safety with each other.

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One thing that I never understood about my mom was her insistence that she didn't have a strong intellect. She would frequently stop me in the middle of my telling her about some world event or social change campaign that I was involved with, and she would insist that she really didn't understand such things, and therefore couldn't process the information. It was one of her core beliefs about herself — that she was inadequate in this fundamental way. This never made any sense to me, and I didn't believe a word of it. My mom was both smart and wise, emotionally and intellectually. But for reasons that I may never understand, she did not trust her own brain.

I can't think of any other ways that she viewed herself as inadequate. She was quite self-contained. She knew who she was and what she wanted. She was very much the head of the family, as women often are in Jewish families.

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I have self-identified as a grassroots community organizer for most of my adult life. What I only came to understand in the final few weeks of my mom's life is that she was too! But that her organizing work was about building deep community, wherever she lived. And WOW was she good at it! I always knew about the individual parts of that aspect of her life, but somehow the entirety of it, the vast wholeness of it, escaped me until just weeks before she died, as I listened to visitor after visitor tell her at her bedside how their lives had been enriched by her. In retrospect, it's really hard for me to understand how I could have missed this extraordinary quality in her, and by then it was already too late to have a meaningful conversation with her about this.

I guess it is not that surprising — that deep community-building focus of hers — given that we have both been driven in our lives to stand against injustice. Her lived reality was as a child of a Holocaust family, most of whom were Dutch and were killed during the Nazi occupation of Holland. So of course a whole body urgency about justice and safety in community would be central to her inner being.

My mother had spunk!

My mother had a wonderful laugh and a great sense of humor.

My mother loved people.

My mother was a great listener, and a skilled empath.

My mother was an absolutely amazing letter writer.

My mother cared deeply about her family, and the wellbeing of the world.

I have never taken it for granted how amazing it has been for me to have made it to this ripe old age of 63 before I had to say goodbye to my living breathing loving capable and truly adorable mother. What a blessing! What an incredible blessing!

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I am SO grateful to my sister that she was able to convince my parents to not waste any time moving from Albuquerque to Bellingham after they retired. It was one of the best decisions of their lives. They got to start anew while they were still in their early years of elderhood. To establish so many close new friendships, to become really active in the community, to get to know my sister's many friends, and to ground with her three amazing children.

And during their early years in Bellingham, I was living in a yurt in the rainforest on the wild west coast of Vancouver Island near Tofino. So I got to visit them regularly, and the entire family traveled every summer to my village for a week of playing together in the ancient forests and sandy beaches of that lovely place.

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I spent three full weeks with my mom during the recent big snow and deep freeze over late December and early January. At that point, I hadn't yet realized that mom was about to decide that this was the moment that she would end her life. It was again a wonderful visit, with us both stuck inside together, cooking and baking, watching movies, playing Rummikub. I loved looking out the windows at our frozen white world, while mom absolutely hated it. She felt so trapped, but still she knew and appreciated that she was safe and warm.

Just a week after I returned home, I was alerted that mom wasn't feeling well at all, and had mostly stopped eating. All of a sudden, my sister and I realized that this was it. The beginning of the end. Just five days later, I drove back to Bellingham, and told mom I would stay with her and take care of her until she died, whether that was weeks or a month or more.

For the final twenty days of mom's life, I was her 24/7 in-home caregiver. Hospice nurses came frequently. We hired our own nurse who visited every morning and really hit it off with mom. My sister and her husband visited and assisted multiple times each day. All of their children came to see her. What a wild and amazing and emotionally turbulent adventure those final weeks were for all of us!

I am still absolutely blown away by how brave my mom was in her final weeks of life! Almost till the end, my mom was in control of exactly what she wanted. It didn't bother her that she was heading down a path that so few people consciously take. She was ready to go, and she had no doubts about her decision at all. She knew that her kids would support her wishes, so she could relax into that knowing. And just let go.

Till the end, she was upbeat. Receiving endless phone calls and in-home visits from her bed, connecting with friends far and wide. I became her social secretary, as half a dozen friends would drop by every day for their final moments with their beloved friend. It was so incredibly beautiful to witness! There was so much love in the air! It was unbelievable! And to anyone who told her how sad they were, she would respond that everything was fine. That it was what she wanted. It was an absolutely amazing thing for me to personally witness, day after day.

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I adored my mother. And now she is gone. She has POOFED out of existence. I am writing this 23 days after she died, and I'm still absolutely stunned that she isn't here in her lovely home

anymore. Her home sits mostly still, without her beautiful warm presence. A home filled with 27 well-lived years in Bellingham.

I miss her so much!

I haven't cried this much EVER.

And I know that it is what she wanted, when she wanted. If a death can be a beautiful thing, then mom manifested such a death. What a blessing!

I love you, mom!



January 9, 2022 — 34 days before mom died:

See the two women between mom and me? That's mom on the left and her mom on the right, a loooong time ago. And the photo over my mom's right shoulder? That's me! And the photo above that? My sister and I as young'uns!