

I've given a lot of thought as to what I would say as the one year anniversary of my mother's death approached. I think it goes without saying how much I loved my mother and how much I miss her. It is undisputed.

All of this really started on January 7, 2014. A few years before that mom had had a few strokes. She had been in and out of hospitals and nursing homes for several years. Of course she always hated being in a rehab center or nursing home but she always knew that was in her best interest to be there because she knew how difficult it was to be here at the house with no one here to care for her. She had always been very cooperative when it came to her medical issues and as much as she didn't like to do that, she was always very complacent about it. When she spent weeks in the rehab center, she would always ask me when she could come home.

The morning of January 7, at approximately 9:00, we were sitting at the kitchen table talking and all of a sudden she stopped responding to me. She had a very glazed look on her face and I had a feeling that something was wrong. I called out her name but there was no response. When I shook her there was no response.

I've seen this look before. I instinctively took her blood pressure only to find out it was 80/40 and I knew that to be the danger zone. I immediately called 911 and they were here within 5 minutes. By the time they arrived she seemed to be coming to a little bit. Because of her age, the emergency technicians felt it would be a good idea to take her to the hospital and find out what happened. Of course she said she didn't want to go and she kept on saying she was fine. I convinced her it was in her best interest to go to the hospital and have them check this out and find out what is going on. She was very reluctant but she agreed. I had the feeling this would be the last time she would see her home.

She was taken to Sherman Oaks Hospital which is less than a mile away from the house and the easiest one to go to. She was there for three days going through a myriad of tests to rule out any strokes or any heart issues. After the three days in the hospital

pretty much on observation, the doctors thought it would be a good idea for her to go to the rehab center and trying to get more strength. Of course she did not want to go but she realized it was in her best interest that she do this. The Sherman Oaks rehab center was literally across the street from the hospital so it didn't take anything at all to get her over there.

She was suffering from a mild case of dementia which at that point had not affected her speech or her memory as it did in the two years coming up. She was never a big eater but she did the best she could in a rehab center and she said that the food was OK.

I visited with her every day because the rehab center is only a mile from the house. It was important for her to know that people still cared for her and loved her and came to visit with her. Every day she would get up and get dressed with assistance from the caregivers at the center. They had a rule that you don't eat in your room unless you're not feeling well. Other than that you go to the dining room. You get up, you get dressed and you start your day. It's called ADL – Activities of Daily Living. She was encouraged to interact with other people and she really tried. There were times that Carlos and I would go there and take her out for lunch to get her out for a little bit. Every time we did that however, she always asked if she was going home. I would always tell her that we can do anything without a doctor's approval and she always said OK.

She participated in physical therapy every day. More often than not she would try to show off in physical therapy and the therapists would tell me that she's doing a great job. I knew the time would come that the physical therapist would tell me that there is nothing more that they can do for her. That time came in April of 2014, three months after she had arrived at the center. I was no longer in a position to take care of her by myself at home and I wondered what to do.

I have never been one to hold back from telling my mother anything. I was always truthful with her and always on the level. So that day came when I told her that the Dr.

said she was going to be released. I told her that we did run into a situation where I would not be able to bring her back to the house because I could not care for her by myself. I told her that I thought it was in her best interest that we look for an assisted living facility. She would get 24 hour care that I could not provide. She would get her meals, her own apartment, and make some new friends. Her response of course was “...but when can I go home?...” although it broke my heart to have to tell her this, I approached it with a positive attitude and told her that I am will move all of her furniture and belongings over to the new apartment.

Before she was actually released from the rehab center, I took her on a day outing over to the assisted living facility that Carlos and I had found, and showed her her new apartment. As I took her into her new apartment, she commented that this was a very lovely apartment building... but “when can I go home?”



We got mom settled into her new apartment in May. We continued to tell her how nice this was and how nice everybody was and everybody is there to help her get settled. I told her that I thought the apartment was so nice that if she didn't want to move in, I would. I brought all of her belongings from her bedroom at the house and arranged for them to be brought to the new apartment. I try to make things look as familiar as I could possibly do. I brought her bed, her dresser, her night stands, her television, the couch, pictures on the wall she was familiar with from home. By time we were finished, her apartment was very very nice.

Remembering Shirley – La Madre Dice

I offered to spend the first few nights with her so she would not feel alone but she told me that she would be just fine and that I did not need to do that. There was a glimmer of hope. After a few months, I would ask her how she's doing, and she said she was "content" and that was a sigh of relief.

I would say for the next year and a half she seemed to settle in very well. She was becoming acquainted with the facility and the people who lived there. She had a specific place in the dining room at a table with three other women. Once a week or so, Carlos and I would join her for dinner. She always liked that. She loved it when we were around with her. She told me many times she would like to take Carlos and me to Hawaii but I said that the doctors had advised against any traveling. I do recall the short day trips we went on; one in particular was to Santa Barbara on the train. I was hesitant because if she should have an issue, what would I do? But we went anyway on what started out to be a beautiful day but increasing clouds brought rain that afternoon. Mom was in the wheelchair as we pushed her up and down the pier. It was cool so we had brought her blanket to keep her warm ...just in case...and I'm glad we did. As we were strolling down the pier, she was wrapped up in the blanket, and just loving every minute of it. We stopped into a hat shop and Carlos takes a couple hats and puts them on her, to her absolute delight.



Every few days we would take her out for lunch or we would take her out for dinner. She was getting to the point where she was eating with her hands instead of a fork and I understand that is not unusual for a person with early dementia. There are certain things you forget to do and eating properly is one of them. There came a time that I had to start cutting Mom's meals for her because she was not able to do it. I did it proudly and gently so she wouldn't think she was being treated like a child. One of her favorite places to go for dinner was IHOP, and one of her favorite meals was cinnamon French toast. Now, remember that she was never a big eater but when she ordered that and they brought two pieces of bread with syrup, sugar and cinnamon, she ate that as though it was her last meal. I would cut the French toast into bite size pieces and if she ate with her hands it was no big deal. She would always enjoy going out to dinner with us and I really think it wasn't so much the food as it was the company and the fact that Carlos and I loved her so much and she always knew that. Every time we came into her apartment, she would always greet us with open arms and a big smile and tell us how special it was for her that we were there.

Her dementia was progressing to the point that she would ask how far the house was from her, are we both in the same time zone and area code, but always, "when can I go home?"

In July of 2014 I fell and broke my hip. That fall necessitated my being in the hospital for hip replacement surgery and since this happened on a Wednesday night at 9:00, I had no way to get in touch with her to let her know. Surely she would've been worried because she did not hear from me. Once I had my surgery and I was transferred to a rehab center for two weeks, I called her and told her that will be several weeks before I could see her again because of what happened. It was very upsetting to me not to be able to see her for that length of time.

Two weeks of physical therapy went by and when I was released, Carlos drove me over to the facility to see her. The look on her face when she saw me was incredible. I

missed her as much as she missed me. I was in a walker and she felt very bad for me about what happened. But we tried to resume our weekly visits with each other with dinner at lunch.



Even though I was in the walker we always found time to go over there and be with her. I could see the progression of dementia that seemed overnight. It seemed to be getting worse day by day. I felt absolutely helpless because there was nothing I could do about this and there was nothing that could be done by anybody else. She was continuing to ask when she could come home and I was continuing to tell her the truth that she is not able to come home because I have no way to take care of her. As things progressed she eventually stopped asking. We would continue to visit with her several times a week and take her out as much as we could. By this time she was in hospice care and even when nurses came in to take care of her, I was honest with her and I told her that these nurses are from palliative care and they are here to keep her comfortable. She never fought it. She truly was a good patient, and very agreeable to everything that was being done for her.

As the days and the weeks turned into months it seemed that the dementia progressed rapidly. My worst fear came true when I got a call from the facility saying that mom had left the building at 6:00 AM. They found her and she was OK but I told her that she cannot do that. If she wants to go outside she has to have someone with her. She agreed and she said she would never do it again and she did not.

Around October of that year, hospice it said that she really should have a hospital bed because she was becoming a fall risk. I remember her sitting on the couch when the

bed was delivered and I told her that I bought a new bed for her that would make it easy to get in and out of and she thought that was great.

As the weeks went on, it seemed that the dementia went into high gear. We came in to visit with her one day and she had a very glazed and strange look on her face. The first thing she said was “who are you?”

I didn’t know if she was joking with me or if I was looking at a problem I had to address as soon as possible.

It turns out that the dementia had really gotten bad and this was a typical sign of dementia patients that they forget their loved ones and forget where they are and what they’re doing. It’s part of the disease. It was the most heartbreaking thing I’ve ever been through not being recognized by my own mother. Every time I came in to see her from then on I told her who I was and I sat down with her and I held her hand. I would always ask her if she knew who I was and she would always say no. At one point she thought I was her father and I said “no I’m your son. I’m Michael” and she would always say OK. I don’t think she ever realized what was going on. If she ever knew, she’d have been mortified and grossly humiliated. If she ever thought in her younger years that the end would be like this, she’d have asked me to just kill her. I never discussed dementia with her because there was never a reason to. At this stage of her life all I wanted to do was keep her comfortable and keep her as happy as I could. She had stopped eating anything at this point so we could not take her out for lunch and dinner anymore and all she ate was Ensure. That seemed to be easier for her to swallow than solid food. She was drinking approximately four cans a day. As she could tolerate, I would bring her in ice cream or Jello or something soft...and sweet. She loved sweets. I had to feed this to her because she could no longer feed herself. She would generally take a bite or two and then not eat anything else. In mentioning this to the doctor, we both agreed that at this stage, it doesn’t matter where the calories come from, as long as she’s getting something.

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One of the hardest things I ever had to come to realize is that this once vibrant woman who used to run an escrow office, volunteer for over 50 years with the City of Hope and head countless hours of participation with the Pearl Harbor Survivors Association is now a bedridden invalid. I spent many sleepless nights and more often than not crying myself to sleep. What has happened to this woman who raised me? What has happened to this woman who was there for me my entire life? What has happened to this woman who used to laugh every day? What has happened to my mother?



Hospice told us at this time there is nothing more they can do except keep her comfortable and now we're probably only looking at another couple months. By the end of the year it was a lost cause. Even though she was still alive, I was grieving and trying to make sense of this but I couldn't. I was in constant contact with hospice and constant contact with the facility where Mom now lived. At this point mom was pretty much bedridden. She had become incontinent and no longer functioned under her own power. She no longer recognized me but I want to feel in my heart that she knew I was there with her.

People used to ask me, if she no longer recognizes you and doesn't know who you are, why do you continue to go? The answer was always very simple. She may not know who I am but I know she is.

2016 saw me with my 69th birthday. We went through Valentine's Day. We went through Mother's Day. On June 21, 2016, we celebrated as best we could her 95th

birthday. We know it was futile to wish her a happy birthday because she couldn't understand what we were saying and she had no way to respond to us. But we did come in on her birthday and we did wish her a happy birthday because that was important to us.

At this stage of her life she was no longer speaking and no longer had any eye movement or any recognition that we were there. We would always talk to her hoping that she heard our words of love and tenderness and know that her family was with her.

In late August as I was getting ready to leave, I took her arm and put it on my shoulder. I told her, "Please give me a hug because a boy needs his mother to hug him." She was not able to give me a hug as I put her arm of my shoulder but she patted me on my back and said "its OK". Always a mother.

As I said goodbye to her and gave her a hug, she said to me, "thank you so much for everything." That was the last thing my mother ever said to me and that is what I will remember for the rest of my life. Mom's last words to me.

Mom was moved to another room just a few doors down from the nurses' station so that make things easier when the nurses had to go in and check on her.

On September 9 2016, hospice began 24 hour care for her. I knew the end was near. She was no longer able to drink anything because she just wasn't strong enough to pull anything through the straw. Hospice was there with her day and night to make sure that she was kept comfortable. She never complained of any pain or discomfort throughout this entire ordeal so I knew that she was never in any pain or distress and that was a blessing to me.

Monday, September 12 was Carlos's birthday and we went to visit with her. She was comatose as she had been the several months before then so we didn't stay very long. We stayed long enough for me to satisfy myself that she was OK. I held her hand, I stroked her hair, I kissed her forehead. I said goodbye.

That evening at home I got a call from the Dr. who told me that he had seen her that day. Her blood pressure was very low. Her respiration was very high. He told me

that it could be just a matter of a couple days before she was gone. I did not spend a very comfortable night that night.

At 9:40 the next morning the hospice nurse who spent the night with her called me. I expected her to tell me that mom is comfortable and she's OK as they had done in the past. I was getting daily calls from the nurse and that's what I expected to hear. I guess I didn't expect what she told me.

"I'm sorry to tell you that your mom passed away at 9:32." I was practically inconsolable but I had Carlos here with me who took care of me as he always did. I am now dealing with the tragedy of a death in my family. I expected it but that didn't make it easier. My mother was gone. The nurse said that the mortuary would be by at around 11:00 so if I wanted to come see mom, that was perfectly all right. I declined.

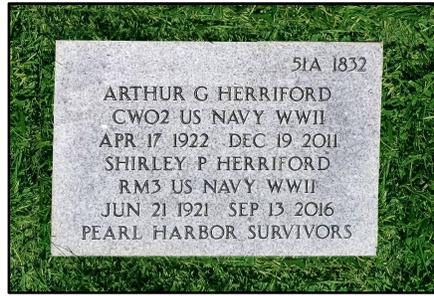
The days and weeks that followed I had to deal with the business side of losing my mother. I had to contact the mortuary, the cemetery, the crematory, Social Security, the insurance, and even though I was dealing with the death of my mother there was still business that had to be taken care of.

On Monday, September 19 I went to the mortuary to retrieve Mom's ashes. We were presented with the American flag that would be part of the memorial service that we had to plan for her.

We finally brought mom home and made arrangements to have her buried with Arthur in April of 2017. It was essential that Scott and Sonja be here for Mom's burial but they couldn't make it out until then.

Mom was laid to rest on April 6, 2017 with her beloved Arthur at Riverside National Cemetery. Her entire family was graveside as we laid her to rest. I had brought two dozen roses and each one of us took a rose and placed it inside the grave with her. I think parts of all our hearts were buried with her that Thursday afternoon. She was fondly remembered by her brother and sister-in-law, her 2 children and all her grandchildren.

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As they covered her grave, my heart broke. We did not linger at the cemetery but afterwards we went to lunch at the Cheesecake Factory in Riverside and we remembered Mom with love and compassion. When we did this for Art 5 years before, Mom said that this is what she wants when she dies: For the family to be together for a nice lunch ... “on her....”

The next day, 53 of her friends and family gathered in our backyard to pay tribute to the woman we all loved for so many years. The day was perfect. The weather could not have been better. This was the home she loved for well over 40 years. I arranged for a tent on the back lawn and five tables and 50 chairs placed underneath the tent. I had an entire program planned that included two songs that I sang, remembrances and reflections from everybody who wanted to come up to the microphone, and Taps. My mother was honored with the highest honor that could be paid to an American citizen who was in the service. And that was to have Taps played and the flag folded in her honor.

You are home now, Mom.

I love you.

I miss you.

I'm your boy.

