

My Mom Said 7 Cryptic Words To Me On Her Deathbed. Here's What I Finally Realized As I Got Closer To My Own.

"I was 32 when my mother died. The difficulties in our relationship — her anger with me and my judgments of her — had not been resolved."

By Virginia DeLuca
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"I don't want to be a gork," I say from my hospital bed, clutching the arm of Josh, my youngest. At 42, his curls are going gray.

He squeezes my hand.

I have been in the emergency room for hours while the medical team waits and watches. Earlier, they informed me that another stroke was likely imminent, maybe only hours away. They said strokes often cascade, coming one after another, knocking out more of the brain, causing greater incapacitation, culminating in death.

I leak tears. My fear is primal.

Zac, my middle son, also gray, attempts to decipher my sounds. He patiently teaches me the word, sounding it out slowly: "Str...o...ke."

We practice repeatedly.

Orion, my oldest, with silver patches in his beard, is texting, keeping everyone updated with my news.

I notice all my boys' gray hair as if for the first time. My sons have done the role switch, and now they are the caregivers.

I do not like it.

“How unfair that this stroke took out language,” I attempt to say. “Why couldn’t the stroke have blocked my knowledge of particle physics? I could’ve lived without particle physics,” I try to joke, but everything is coming out garbled. I want to convince my sons (and myself) that there is nothing to be worried about.

“Isn’t it ironic that I finished an essay about aging the day before my brain exploded?” This is what I’d hoped to say, but those aren’t the words that leave my mouth. Inside my mind, I speak in coherent, clear sentences.

“The iron essay is orange,” I say, believing I’m offering lightheartedness. “Hmm?” Zac cocks his head. “Would you like some water?” He hands me a cup.

I imagine my strange combinations of words horrify my sons.

Orion smooths the blanket.

In the hallway, quick steps and loud voices billow the curtain that serves as the door of my emergency room cubicle. The air smells crowded and stale.

“Ironic!” I almost shout, exhilarated that I’ve gotten out the correct word.

Zac and Orion leave to get food, air and a break.

“I don’t want to be a gork,” I repeat to Josh.

He smiles indulgently, perhaps a tad patronizing, and says, “I don’t think that’s a word.”

“Google it,” I order. How does the word “Google” come out sounding clear and understandable?

Josh looks at his cellphone and then smiles. “Who knew that ‘gork’ was a real word?”

I’ve always imagined my eventual death as slow — some kind of terminal illness — with everyone gathered by my bed, me calmly dispensing love and wisdom, having all the time to say all that we need to say to each other.

“I don’t want you to lose your future,” I think I’m announcing, but I’m not. Josh looks blank. I want him and his brothers to know that if I end up unable to care for myself, they must send me to a home.

“You must not spend your future taking care of me,” I try again, but it comes out as, “You shouldn’t spend taking me.”

“Sorry,” Josh says again. “I don’t understand.”

Orion and Zac return to my bedside. They also have no idea what I am trying to say.

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Thirty-nine years ago, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. She immediately tried to quit smoking. She was 68, and I was 32.

Six weeks after her diagnosis, my mother was in the hospital in Vermont, sick with sepsis.

The doctor told her they could prolong her life for another few weeks, possibly a month.

When the doctor left, my mother grabbed my arm and pulled me close. “I’m done. Make this dying happen.”

I remember this command as a hiss.

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I’m eventually moved from the ER to the stroke unit, and the hospital kicks my sons out. I lie alone and awake, watching the window, waiting for morning. When the sky finally lightens, I sit up and grin. I made it through the night.

Doctors appear at my bed. The shaggy-haired resident and the dark-ponytailed intern tell me I’ve had an ischemic stroke. They look solemn. They ask for my name, the month and the date. I rattle off the answers.

“Good, good,” the doctors say, seemingly impressed.

I point to the calendar on the wall behind them.

We laugh at how I cheated, and then I proceed to fail the rest of their tests. They ask me to repeat phrases like “it is sunny now, but earlier, in Boston, it was cloudy.” But I can only remember “it was cloudy.” I can’t remember the “sunny” part. I ask them to repeat it. Again, I can’t remember.

“Will I get better?” I ask.

“You’ll improve, but you’ll never be the same,” says Dr. Shaggy-Hair. Already, I can’t remember his name.

“What do I do?”

“We’ll run tests ... ”

I stop listening and let him rumble on.

At 70, it isn’t like my other ages have disappeared. No, I’ve simply expanded to include them all: The little girl proud of the fancy red bow in her hair lives within the anxious fifth grader practicing for the spelling test and the sulky bob-haired teen. In this hospital room, I am the dejected 5-year-old holding back tears.

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My mother told the doctor that she was ready to die. “Give me the pill.”

“There is no pill,” he said, “but we can give you a high dose of morphine that will keep you comfortable.”

Individually, my mother brought my brothers and me into her room to say goodbye.

I pulled my chair close to the bed and held her hand.

“I know I wasn’t the best mother,” she told me.

I immediately took my hand away from hers, reaching to give her water. What could I say to that?

Should I have nodded and said that I agreed? Should I have protested and told her she was the best? Her statement required an entire conversation, many conversations, and we were out of time.

I held her hand again and told her I loved her. That much was true.

“Get the doctor,” she replied. “Tell him I’m ready for the morphine.”

* * *

I slip off the hospital bed and wince at the bright sun.

Years ago, I remember when my brother John was dying of AIDS and it took him a long time to form words. He was 42 years old. Sitting with him on the deck, enjoying the warm sun on our skin, I insisted he must talk to his kids.

“You should tell them you’re dying — give them a chance to have their feelings.”

He didn’t speak. He simply shook his head no.

As a psychotherapist, I’ve spent my career helping people sort through shame and guilt. Undoubtedly, the most challenging parts of parenting are the unintentional wounds.

For decades, I wondered what my mother meant when she told me those last seven cryptic words — “I know I wasn’t the best mother.”

I don’t want to leave my children burdened with all the unspoken conversations, but my stroke wiped out my speech. I worry I’ve run out of time.

Maybe it isn’t too late. I could write individual letters to my sons, to everyone: my grandchildren, my friends, my daughters-in-law, my niece and my nephews. That would be good.

I sink against the pillow. But if I wrote a letter to each one, I'd be dead before finishing the job. It will take a book. I just need to say goodbye. I sit up to plan what I'll say.

Dear all,

When you get this, I will be gone. I want you all to know how much I love you.

No, that is stupid. If they don't already know that, then indeed, I have failed.

What do I want to say?

"Be careful crossing the street"?

"Life is very short; find joy"?

"Don't sweat the small stuff"?

Do I really want to leave them with clichés?

I slip off the bed again and pace the room.

If I could, I would stay forever. I would listen, encourage and console. I would shade you like an oak tree on sweltering summer days. I would protect you like the fir tree against cold winds. I would offer blooms of spring to celebrate your dreams accomplished. I would burst with the colors of autumn to remind you that even as dark days come, so does hope.

God, this is getting worse by the second. I climb back into the bed.

* * *

When my mother died, I was numb for weeks with the pain of her death. And numb for months with the pain of her life. And numb for years with the pain of our relationship. I wore her clothes. I put her photo on our picture board. I kept her colored glass bottles and garden clippers.

* * *

Five months after my stroke, the daffodils have bloomed. I've mostly recovered. I can write and speak without issue. I occasionally fumble a word, but it is hard to know if it's because of the stroke or just my aging brain.

Darwin, Forest and Luca, my grandsons, visit often, playing games (we're learning Spit) and reading stories. Cynthia, my daughter-in-law, comes to talk daily. Since the stroke, I frequently talk about having The Conversation, but I never start it. I have time, I tell myself. After all, I could last another 15 years. I've settled into denial.

Last week, as we pushed his kids on the playground swings, Josh asked: "Mom, what is this conversation you keep talking about? What's this big secret you want to tell us before you die?"

I laughed. It never occurred to me that my sons wondered what deep secrets I held.

My secrets are all mundane. But I also recognize that I tell each of my sons different stories. I don't mean different versions, although I'm sure that's true as well. One son hears about my car breaking down and my adventure with the tow truck driver. Another son hears what a friend at work told me about our boss, and another hears about the amaryllis blooming. There is no reason for this. It is only what is on my mind at each moment. But the stories I've told create views of me — and my children all will have different ones.

I pushed 2-year-old Hazel as she yelled: "Higher! Higher!" The March day was unseasonably warm and sunny, and little kids and parents filled the park. Four-year-old Oakley concentrated on pumping on the next swing.

I understand now why my brother did not want a final conversation. How impossible that is. I also don't want a final goodbye. There's always more to the story.

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I was 32 when my mother died. The difficulties in our relationship — her anger with me and my judgments of her — had not been resolved. But even so, after her death, our relationship continued.

I remember how my mother's mother was an alcoholic and absent. I remember that my very private mother asked friends to help her with raising a daughter, to give me makeup tips, to give me advice about boys and to explain details about puberty — things no one had done for her. How brave and generous that was.

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After school, as the days lengthen, my granddaughters hang out reading and drawing on my bed while I fold laundry. Their dad is about to take them home for dinner. Ten-year-old Brigid asks, "Where will you go when you die?"

This is a rather extensive discussion to have as they are leaving.

"Are you asking where my body will go?" I ask.

Seven-year-old Sylvie says: "No, not your body. Where will your soul go?"

I wonder how they know of soul. We are not a religious bunch.

I hesitate, partly because of the stroke and partly because it seems like such a significant topic. I talk about the varied beliefs that people have regarding death. I mention heaven and reincarnation.

"I could become a tree?" I say, trying to keep it light.

"But trees get cut down!" Brigid says.

"And what if we move away?" Sylvie asks.

"We could put the tree in a special place," I say. "Or my ashes could be spread in the ocean, like my mother, and you could visit me whenever you go to the beach."

They wrinkle their noses in disapproval.

Their dad arrives, and as my granddaughters walk out the door, Brigid calls out, "Will you always be there for me to talk to you after you die?"

“Yes!” I shout as they walk down the porch stairs.

That may be all that is needed.

I close the door. All of these decades after my mother’s death, I now know that love is always flawed and there is no painless way to say goodbye — no conversation that could ever impart everything I feel. I decide to stop worrying about providing the perfect ending. Words can only offer so much. Instead, I will focus on the loving. That way, no matter what happens or is left unsaid, I am certain they will know everything they need to know.

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