

I grew up in a family that talked little about money, and less about sex. But mostly what we didn't talk about was death. The idea of discussing it and planning for it was utterly foreign to my parents. I suspect that in this way we were like a lot of other families. We left decisions about death in God's—and doctors'—hands.

The years went by and my parents got older and more frail—especially my father, who developed Parkinson's disease—and still we didn't talk about death. By the time my mother, at age 80,



Was I right to let my mother die?

underwent an emergency operation that left her life hanging in the balance, my father was already in a nursing home, barely able to speak.

The strain of the operation and its aftermath affected my mother's mind. She would sometimes hallucinate and otherwise stray mentally from the here and now. It was not the time to ask her about what kind of life-and-death medical decisions she wanted us to make for her should she be unable to make them for herself. Yet we knew they might have to be made. Her physical condition was precarious, her existence narrowed to her bed, her kitchen table and occasionally her front porch.

Immediately after my mother's operation, her surgeon had indicated to us that he didn't think she would survive for long. Her heart, he said, might give out at any moment. At her doctor's suggestion, we put a Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) order into effect while she was still in the intensive care unit. We agreed that if her heart stopped we did not want the hospital staff to use heroic measures to revive her, nor did we want her kept alive on a respirator. However, when she rallied and became conscious again the following day, we quickly rescinded the order. By then another doctor had handed down a more favorable prognosis, and we were hopeful that she might not only survive but resume an existence that would not be devoid of pleasure or purpose.

Bette-Jane Raphael, left, with her mother and sister.

But my mother never really regained her strength or her faculties. Over the next few months she was in and out of the hospital several times until, in what turned out to be her final hospitalization, she suffered what we were told was a massive stroke.

That evening, my sister and I sat by the bed where she lay as if asleep, snoring quietly. She could remain this way for months, her doctor said, or her heart could fail soon, that very night perhaps. We had to decide whether or not to put a DNR order in place before we left the hospital. If we did nothing, we could return the next day to find our mother on a respirator. Once she was on it, we understood, it would be hard to have her taken off.

We signed the order. At two o'clock the following morning, her doctor called to tell us that she had died.

I loved my mother very much. She cared about me in a way that nobody else ever has or will. She was my friend. She made me laugh. Sometimes she made me crazy. Hey, she was my mother. I admired many things about her: her loyalty, her physical beauty, her potato pancakes. But what I always admired most was her ability to have a good time. Nobody could sip a martini or eat a lobster with more relish, and nobody could laugh louder at a funny line.

My mother didn't just live; she lived it up.

During her last months, she had come as close as she ever would to talking about death. My sister and I would sit with my mother on her bed, reminiscing about her youth, her marriage to our father and our own childhoods, and at one point or another she would say, "I've had a good life." And while she didn't go on to utter the logical follow-up phrase, "and I'm ready to die," it hung in the air, a given.

We took these words as a hint of her readiness to leave us, of her desire not to pay any price to survive. We remembered them when the time came to sign the DNR.

To this day I worry about whether my decision was affected by my own needs: the need not to see her suffer, the need to free my own life from the burden of her suffering. And I grieve that I could not save my mother, as she once had saved me when I was an infant with whooping cough and her round-the-clock ministrations pulled me through.

Had my family spoken earlier and more openly about death, I might have been spared this unease. We thought we could afford to be silent, but we couldn't. No one can anymore. No one, no matter how young, can assume that she will never have to make the kind of momentous choice my sister and I confronted. Life is just too chancy for that.

Certainly it would have been easier if we had not been asked to choose. Yet I am, finally, grateful that the responsibility—the privilege—was ours. For who was more qualified than we, her children, to weigh my mother's final hints, along with everything else we knew about her from decades of life lived at her side, and from all this distill a decision about her death? If making such a choice is a terrible burden, who should heft it if not us, to whom she meant so much?

Did I do right by my mother? I think so. I hope so. I'll never be sure. I only know that I did my best, which is all she ever asked.

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