

Late-Night Calls

Category: Afraid

written by Ronna L. Edelstein | July 31, 2017

Many things frighten me—from creepy-crawlers to turbulence on airplanes, from intravenous needles to walking across bridges over menacing rivers. However, late-night phone calls, especially from my family, send shivers up and down my spine. That is why I froze with fear when I received a call from my parents at 11 p.m. on February 28, 1986.

My beloved paternal grandmother, a woman who had never undergone any surgery and had been hospitalized only once (for a sprained arm), was in the hospital. Excruciating stomach pain had led to emergency surgery. Grandma, who looked younger than her ninety years and who maintained a high quality of life in her own apartment, was deteriorating on the inside. An abdominal aneurysm had burst, causing many of her major organs to begin to shut down.

Putting aside my fear of flying, I took the next flight to be with Grandma. I sat with her, held her hand and prayed that she would be okay. I told her how much she meant to me, because the nurses insisted that even patients in a coma could still hear. Grandma died two days later—on Sunday, March 2.

I was thirty-eight years old when Grandma died. She was the first person I loved who died, and her death—so unexpected—increased my fear of death. It made me profoundly cognizant that my parents were aging, that each birthday made me a year older, that death could come at any time, even to someone as strong as Grandma. The specter of death shadowed my days and haunted my nights.

I have since received other late-night phone calls—from my son, telling me of a torn Achilles heel and impending surgery; from my daughter, informing me that a fall down the stairs of her apartment building had broken her leg; from my dad, sharing word that he was scheduled for removal of a tumor from his colon. All of these calls have been medically related, and all have changed the way I perceive life. They have reminded me of the fragility of life, of the importance of embracing a “carpe diem” mentality, of always ending calls with family and friends with an “I love you” assurance.

Even when a late-night phone call is a wrong number, I still experience a momentary frisson of fear about the well-being of those I love.

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