

Why We Had a Steel Band at Mom's Memorial Service

Category: Letting Go

written by Jennifer Downs | October 12, 2019

Charm City Steel, the five-piece band, pick up their sticks and in rhythm tap out a fetching tune on their huge steel drums. This is the preamble to a special program to celebrate and remember my mom, who died of advanced dementia at age eighty-seven in my home. The music lifts me as people wander in.

It is Mom's memorial service, and she asked for this. It was ten years ago out of the blue, between steel drum dance tunes while vacationing together in Maine. She pointed at me from across the village green and said, "I want a steel band at my funeral!" No matter that she never brought up death or dying before or since. At that moment the heavens opened, and she delivered her wish to me. And I said to her, to myself and my daughter Amelia: "Done."

The simplicity with which mom ambled through the last months, weeks and days of her life was an inspiration to me. She was childlike in her fascination with beautiful things, or even ordinary things: rocks, leaves, anything that caught her eye. She walked up to toddlers and almost got down to play with them, not self-conscious in the least. Her face brightened, and she beamed out of the depths of her dementia. It was as though the loss of cognitive function took with it any scrap of anxiety, of which she had plenty for much of her life.

For me, who had my healthy share of "mother issues" as a teenager and young adult, it was profound to be with her during this time of cognitive deterioration that people tend to assume is tragic. In fact, her blue eyes often shone in wonder at things she saw, and some glances at me and others, especially my dad, were full of uninhibited tenderness.

I sat with her on the last night, when everyone else had gone to sleep. Her breathing was fast and loud until I got up close and held her foot in one hand and her arm in the other. Then she quieted and her breathing slowed. Gradually it got slower, stopped a few times momentarily, and then just stopped. I was stunned and grateful all at once. She was so peaceful. I sat in the stillness of the middle of the night and observed her face grow more relaxed and at ease.

I have the urge to walk in the forest almost daily now. Just yesterday I had the feeling that the trees were leaning in toward me, and I smiled in thanks. I remembered the lively command, "I want a steel drum at my funeral" and thought how she was the mom I wished for and only found at the very end of her life.

Jennifer Downs

Baltimore, Maryland