

Caring for Mom

©Carol L. Bluestein 2014

"I can't go back there," I said aloud to the ether, as I ran, bobbed and wove through the people mass on the sidewalk. A left turn at the corner, then twenty more steps and I was at my car. Two seconds later, I sat in the drivers seat, opened the window and tried to decompress before starting the car. The anger from another time had punched me in my gut. I hate feeling powerless and worse, I don't forgive the gross insensitivity of others.

Calm after some deep breathing exercises but still depressed, I decided to get a cup of coffee before going home. I found a small shop that did a fast paced takeout business but had empty tables in the back. I slipped into the chair in the far corner and the server came over and placed a menu on the table.

"Coffee, black," I said as he slid the menu towards me. I pushed it back. "No thanks." Before he could move, I said, "Wait a minute. Can I get a hot fudge sundae?"

The young man regarded me for a long moment and said, "Yes."

I was half way through my coffee when he returned and set the confection on the table in front of me. I just stared at it, wondering if I had the energy to eat it.

"Tell me," he said and sat down.

I stared at him in disbelief. How could he know? "Don't you have work to do?" I said "My shift just ended," he said. "I've no place to be right now."

I looked at the young man. He had a kind face and bright dark brown eyes—young enough to be my grandson. But perhaps the universe was talking to me and I decided to trust him. "I know this will sound silly, but I was at a seminar and the conversation veered toward hospital care."

"Is that bad?"

"No, not necessarily," she said. "I'm not sure you'll be able to understand this, but there is a very definite bias against the aged. I was my mother's patient advocate until her death. I encountered an enormous and routine lack of respect and dismissive attitude towards her and others. And demanding respect for her placed an additional burden on me and sucked up energy that should have gone to her." I felt the anger rise again so I picked up the spoon and started eating the sundae.

"So, you're saying she was being treated as an old woman and not..." He paused and waited.

"Roslyn," I offered.

"Yes, not as Roslyn."

"Old people are written off as slow moving, hard of hearing, difficult, fearful, forgetful and demanding."

"There is some truth in that," he said.

She smiled. "I know. But they are still living beings with accomplished lives whose emotional state is skewed by pain, drugs, fear and disorientation. Their exaggerated behavior is often just a symptom."

He nodded. "Seems obvious."

"To us maybe, but in the current time-managed intensive reporting short-staffed short-stay hospital model, efficiency favors 'treat the problem' rather than 'treat the individual.'"

"Is that what upset you?"

"Every time I think of it, yes. In the steady stream of patients, faceless bodies that are going to die anyway are pushed to back of the line. And, as the daughter of such a patient, it was infuriating then and now."

"How long has it been?"

"Six years since she passed."

“Still hurts?”

I nodded, eyes glistening with tears. I picked up the napkin and dabbed them dry. “It still hurts that I couldn’t make her hospital stays better. I know I did intercede on her behalf and it did make her more comfortable. But, that I had to do anything is a failure of the system.”

“Really?”

“Well, no,” I said. “Not really. I know that’d be an unfair expectation.”

“What might help?”

I looked at him. “I have no idea?”

“Seems hard to believe. You’ve been living with this a long time.”

I licked the last bit of hot fudge and ice cream soup from the bottom of the container. He waited without a word. I took a sip of my coffee and cleared my throat. Something popped into my head and I blurted it out. “I think along with the myriad of intake forms, there should be one about the patient’s life and preference history. It might help make them people in the eyes of the staff and encourage multi-dimensional care.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said as he stood up. “I’ve got to go. Your check is on me.” He turned to leave.

“Wait,” I said. “A plan?”

He stopped brought out his wallet and slipped out a card which he gave to me. “I’m starting my internship at Montefiore this fall,” he said. “Let’s stay in touch. If I can help, I will.”

I gave him my card in return and said, “Thank you so much for listening and everything.”

He smiled, nodded as he tucked my card into his pants pocket and walked out.

I watched him leave. After one last sip of coffee, I got up to leave and put his card in my wallet. As I passed the counterman at the register, I paused and said, “Your son is a very nice young man.”

The man said, “He’s not my son. His parents’ own the building.”

I didn’t expect that. “Oh,” I said, my effort to share my good feelings thwarted. After a second, I rebounded with a big smile and said, “And by the way, the ice cream sundae was delicious.”

He said, “We don’t serve ice cream.”

I smiled all the way home, grateful to the knight in shining armor, who paused in his journey, setting aside his quest just long enough to slay my inner dragon.