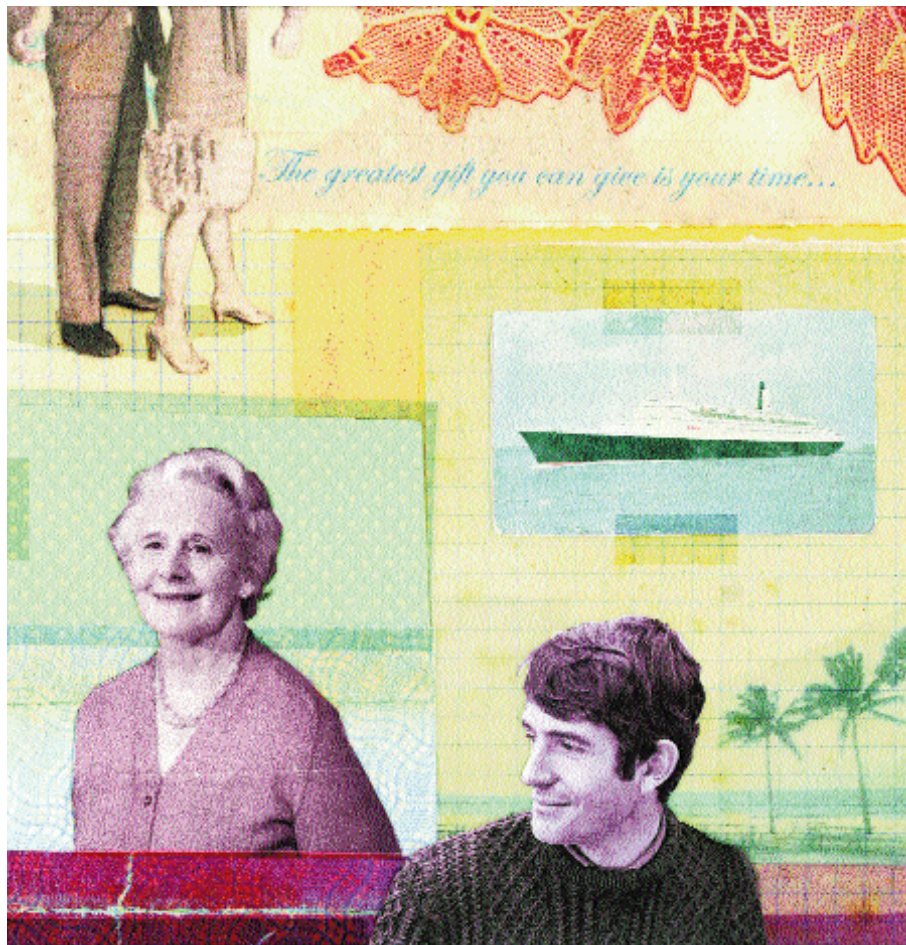


# Kiss the Joy as It Flies By



who for most of my life was quite competitive with me. Suffice it to say, my relationship with her was strained.

I don't remember exactly what triggered my change, but it came sometime after she was diagnosed with leukemia a decade ago. I owned up to the fact that I had played an instigating role in our strained relationship and decided to change my interaction with her. I would conquer the guilt yet spare myself more hurt and expect nothing in return. What I got touched my heart.

My mother is an 86-year-old retired school teacher. She has lived in independent, assisted living and skilled nursing communities. Her leukemia is now stage IV, and this is her fourth bout with cancer. She describes herself, rightly so, as a "survivor." Hip surgery earlier this year is the triggering event that has brought her to what I must now accept as end-of-life. Her most recent fall caused a pelvic fracture that will hasten that journey and make it a more painful one, so she now lives with me. She is what I call "charmingly" confused, yet even today there is an elegance and a grace about her. There is also something I never saw before—a twinkle in her eye.

If I only thought about what I need to do for my mother, the stress of caregiving would be overwhelming, and at times it has been so even for me, a trained gerontologist. There are the sleepless nights, long to-do lists, work absences or reduced schedules, cancelled

WE ARRIVE PHYSICALLY TIRED AND MENTALLY STRESSED using minutes stolen from our busy lives. I am speaking to those of you who are my boomer contemporaries, both male and female, about the visits to our parents at home or in assisted living communities. Unfortunately, far too many of us embrace our eldercare role too late and see it only in its most negative terms. Missed opportunities abound to bring joy to the experience for all.

On an Alaskan cruise this summer, I met a gentleman who understood this. He is a retired businessman who now serves on the boards of several companies and was perfectly comfortable traveling with his 91-year-old mother. They laughed frequently and even teased each other. When I remarked on his caregiver role, he told me he hated that label, "caregiver." It had only negative connotations to him. He prefers to think of himself as a "facilitator of experiences" for his mother. His biggest regret is that he didn't start facilitating experiences for them 20 years earlier.

My regrets are similar. I grew up an only child and would describe myself as daddy's girl. My father, a Stanford graduate, passed away unexpectedly while I was at the Stanford Business School. Therefore, the one who has been dependent upon my care has been my mother,

social events or vacations, doctor and emergency room visits, hospital advocacy, and endless coordinating phone calls as we find ourselves having to take over more and more of the responsibilities of daily life that our parents once handled so competently. Although much of this duty is inevitable, it can be balanced by seeking out some relief, some fun, a change of pace, or what I call a "moment of joy."

**I seek to make the ordinary extraordinary. Whether Mother remembers or not, I appreciate her joy in the moment.**

For me, these moments first came from grand schemes such as the 75th birthday trip I gave my mother to England via the QE2 with the return trip on the Concorde, or her 80th birthday brunch, complete with over 100 friends, a photographer, and a swing band at San Francisco's Mark Hopkins Hotel, where she had once been a professional ballroom dancer. I am glad I did these things when I did because they are no longer possible. These grand experiences were filled with great memories for all, but now I seek to "make the ordinary extraordinary," whether remembered or not, and with that I have found an even greater sense of purpose.

MARTIN O'NEILL

As my mother's world grew smaller, two-hour drives to Monterey or the Russian River replaced the grand events. We enjoyed Monterey most because her long-term memory recalls details of her childhood summers spent there. On one visit, we donated a picture of her father to the historical society. I particularly remember one afternoon in Carmel when she was still able to walk with a walker. I would walk in front of her because it helped her to know where to go. When I turned around to wait for her, she looked at me with a smile and said, "I'm coming," and then, with a well-timed pause, added, "But so is Christmas."

Ten years ago, I didn't even know my mother had a sense of humor.

Now even a two-hour drive is too much, so I found a nearby picnic spot—the cemetery where my father is buried. I treat her to a large milkshake. The first time we did this, about midway through the milkshake, she burst out laughing. "Your father would think we were crazy," she said, and then added, again with a well-timed pause, "So will everyone else. We'd better not let anyone know." Now, the minute we get there we both start giggling.

These days I bring experiences to her. The last was a trip to Hawaii by DVD complete with Hawaiian attire, macadamia nuts, guava juice, mango sorbet, and even leis.

Not every experience I have tried to create has worked out as I had hoped, but that doesn't stop me from trying again. I also must admit disappointment when she can't remember something special I did for her. I have learned to more fully appreciate her joy in the moment.

In MBA terms I find myself thinking of our parent's aging, and our



*Esther Koch and her mother, Harryette Koch, on a trip to the historical society in Monterey, Calif.*

own aging too, as a step function, interspersed with triggering health events, on a trajectory of decline. If the Y-axis of level of health were graphed against the X-axis of time, we all hope to be in the top right-hand corner and then just fall off the graph. In reality it's not likely to be like that. Major health events are inevitable but their timing is uncertain.

In today's world, the greatest gift you can give someone is your time. As scarce a commodity as it is for you, it is even more scarce for your parents. Plus, time changes with age. It slows down; it is in the moment; and it is not multitasking.

I encourage you to not take for granted that your parents will always be as physically and mentally able as they are now, wherever that might be in the continuum. And whether you are male or female, include "facilitator of experiences" in your caregiver job description. At worst, it will make your role more palatable, and at best, it can bring you joy and peace.

May your life be filled with no regrets, may you see the extraordinary in the ordinary, and may someone be there to brighten your world as you age.

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