



One More Night...

There is no easy way through grief. I've tried them. When I pretend to not hurt, the hurt lasts longer. When I deny the pain, the pain intensifies.

What I have discovered is that as I remember and celebrate the gifts of the one I've loved and lost, a peace settles over me as my cup is filled with memories accompanied by a smile, usually a tear.

February 11 my 92-year-old poker playing aunt Bernice suffered an aneurysm. She was in a coma that afternoon, not expected to live beyond the day. When her son asked me to talk to her over the telephone early that evening and she responded, I knew I had to see her.

The last 20 years of my life have been a journey of healing from my mother's sudden death. Sudden death robs you of the chance to say "goodbye" or "thanks," or to ask any questions related to life and plastic pink flamingos.

Bernice had been my "other mother" those 20 years, an anchor who helped me be strong in the loss of both my mom and my dad, her brother. After a night of many tears and little sleep, I walked into hospice with my brother February 12, expecting to see someone in a coma. Instead, Bernice was sitting up in bed, winking and smiling, the famous twinkle still in her eye. We hugged and she held my hand for a long time.

We stayed with her that night. We had suitcases in the car in the hospital parking garage, but we didn't even retrieve a toothbrush. It was one more night with Bernice—my last—and it was going to be right there, in that very room.

I cannot even possibly count the number of nights I spent with Bernice. From early marriage on, her house has been my house. I used to make a Norwegian pastry called rosettes and take them to my Grandma Olga and Bernice in Minneapolis just before Christmas. In those days, Bernice and I could easily stay up talking until 1 or 2 a.m. While our husbands slept, we talked, discovering what we had in common by sharing stories.

Bernice liked "pretty stuff," a challenge growing up in the Depression. One of my favorite stories is how she asked my dad to nail wooden spools to the bottom of her shoes to create the "high heels" she wanted so badly when she was a little girl on the farm.

We spent many nights playing cards—she played to win—and remembering stories about my dad and Grandma Olga, their mother. I was honored—and exhausted—to take Bernice to Norway to see her mother's homeland and meet cousins. Why was I exhausted? Her unending energy, and the fact that I was in charge of luggage and she was buying pewter for presents.

She was like my mother, and this Mother's Day photo from 2009 is one I will always cherish.



The next morning in hospice, the nurse ordering breakfast asked me if Bernice had her teeth in. I smiled and said, "Oh yes, she has her real teeth in." Bernice took exceptionally good care of herself—that's how she had the energy for all the trips and poker games!

I helped Bernice eat breakfast by watching. She fed herself French Toast, then Rice Krispies, then drank her juice and her milk. When it came time for the coffee, I tried to help her so she wouldn't spill on herself. She sipped her coffee and immediately made a face.

This Norwegian took her coffee seriously. On the first of four trips she made with Dad and my brother to Wyoming to visit us, all three of them let me know my coffee was substandard by describing it as "Sh____ coffee." That morning in hospice, when Bernice made a face, I said, "Sh____ coffee?" And she wrinkled her nose, and tried to repeat, "Sh____ coffee" with disgust.

After breakfast she slept. Hands folded, I have no doubt she was prepared and meeting those who went before her—a big group, as she was the last of the entire generation.

Just before we left, alone in the room with her, I held her hand and stroked her hair. With each stroke, I said "Thank you, for....." My list went on and on as tears flowed, my heart heavy with loss, but very grateful for one more night with this woman who had been in my life forever.

Remembering the gifts of someone you love and giving thanks is a wonderful way to heal. I did that via letters to Mom. I did it in person with Bernice.

Two days later, as I drove home from Yankton at 8:00 p.m., I had a poem about Bernice going through my head. Its title? "Heaven Softly Whispered." And as I wrote it in my head, I saw a star falling in the sky. I knew. And she died two hours later.

I will miss her. We were very close. A lifetime of love is hard to lose. So I won't let it go. I'll have my cup of coffee this morning and remember coffee with Bernice, in her kitchen, on her patio. Of course, I'll remember the coffee she made, because who wants to be remembered for being a Norwegian who made "Sh____ coffee?!"

My best,

Dee Dee

Dear Mom E-Letter is a free, monthly publication that encourages the journey of remembering and celebrating the gifts of a mom, and supports healing from loss. Please pass this on to your family, friends, as well as your pastor or parish nurse in order to help others who share this journey.

Dee Dee Raap is the author of Dear Mom: Remembering, Celebrating, Healing and Find Your Pink Flamingos. All rights reserved. To sign up for Dee Dee's free e-letters, go to www.DeeDeeRaap.com.