



My Experiences With Death and Dying

By Jackie Berman

The first experience was with my mother in 1955. She was 54 years old and was diagnosed with advanced cancer. A cancer that she had dealt with 12 years earlier had re-occurred. My father was adamant that she would not die. He would not accept or permit it. We lived in southern California and my father found that the City of Hope, a research hospital, would accept the case on condition that they could perform any treatment they wished, and they did. My mother agreed to this and was put through torturous experimental treatments. The hospital was far from where we lived. My father and I would visit every day only to see my mother's condition worsening and to watch her suffer from both the cancer and the extreme treatments she was receiving. After three weeks she died, not peacefully, but struggling to remove the oxygen mask so she could speak to me. But the nurse in charge would not give in, called code red and as doctors and nurses rushed into mothers' room, father and I were ordered out. She died amid all that hub-bub and we weren't there with her.

After that I became interested in whether it would be possible to prepare for a better death. I joined an organization called Death with Dignity. I learned that my experience in watching my mother's agonizing death was not unique. The organization's mission was to help people who wanted to have some control over their own circumstances when dying. Death with Dignity developed the first legal Advanced Directive Documents, in which people could specify wanted and unwanted treatments if they were unable to speak for themselves. The organization also engaged in lawsuits when hospitals refused to honor the patient's wishes. It is now called Compassionate Choice. I believe that everyone should have an advanced directive. My late husband, Uri, and I each maintained one from that time on.

In the late 1970's, my father and stepmother moved to Palo Alto to be near us after my father was diagnosed with multiple myeloma. They lived happily here, and Dad responded well to his treatment for several years. When the doctor informed us that the chemo would no longer keep the illness at bay, my father went into the local in-home hospice program. It was a great difference from the experience with my mother. The hospice provided many services such as bathing, taking him for walks, a social worker to sort out family issues, and financial counseling. My father did not want to discuss his impending death. Rabbi Axelrad told me that when he visited he would hint about the subject and my father would ask, "What's new in Israel, Rabbi?" My father died peacefully.

It is probably rare for people to be able to express their feelings about their impending death. It did happen to me once, however. A friend who lived in Washington State wrote in her annual holiday letter that her breast cancer, which had been treated extensively, had recurred. In a handwritten addition to the printed letter, she said she intended to do everything she could to overcome her illness, but in case this was not to be, she wanted me to know what our friendship meant to her, and went on to pen some personal thoughts. I was greatly moved by her capacity to face her imminent death and her courage in expressing her deep feelings. Her example is a model for me that I hope I will be able to emulate.

Four years ago, my husband of 56 years was hospitalized briefly and found to be terminally ill. Although he suffered from dementia at the time, I knew exactly what he wanted because we had talked about it, and we had signed all the documents years before. He came home from the hospital, and we had in-home hospice care. The children and grandchildren came to visit, and when the time came, we were together.

I hope my experiences can shed some light and promote discussion about a difficult subject.