

## ***Message from a Manatee***

***by Trisha Jacobson***

*"Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult, once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters."*

*-M. Scott Peck, The Road Less Traveled*

So what if it's all perfect just the way it is? What if the best thing we can do in our busy, often challenging, lives is to slow down our breathing, focus on gratitude, and expand joy as we take our next step?

On August 20, 1996 I sat on a bench in DeSoto Park in Bradenton, Florida with my Aunt Barbara. What would have been my eighth wedding anniversary instead had become the final stage of my divorce. I was so grateful for her invitation to get away from it all, the support she gave me through the process, and for this beautiful spot. As we sat on the bench overlooking the river, we talked about the challenges I had faced through my husband's addiction and the grief and sadness I was feeling as I fully accepted that my marriage was over.

Suddenly we heard a huge splash as a manatee popped out of the water. He swam and played in front of us for several minutes, almost as if to invite us to put away the sadness for just a few minutes and join him for a dose of pure joy. We both delighted in the show and then sat quietly for a while longer as we watched the sunset.

That day I learned some things: there is something about observing nature that grounds me and connects me to the power of gratitude; there is something about being in the present moment with gratitude that seems to open the door to joy. I learned that it is actually possible to feel gratitude in the very same moment I'm feeling sad. I can experience joy in the midst of great pain and grief. I also learned that joy shared with another somehow compounds the experience and that laughing out loud enhances it even further.

I can still remember the exact moment my Mom told me she had made the decision to die. Her health struggles began a couple of years before with a fall that took her off the golf course and into intensive physical and occupational therapy for an injured hip. She fought hard, followed her treatment plan and ultimately reached her goal to get back on the golf course. She was proud of her accomplishment and so happy to be back out there.

A few months later she suffered a stroke that started the whole process all over again. My parents were living in a retirement community in Florida and were surrounded by an

amazing support system; however, Mom's health condition required additional resources as her health declined. I became her healthcare proxy, and my life quickly became a series of last minute scheduling changes based on what was happening with Mom.

If you've ever been the primary caretaker of an aging parent, you know what I was experiencing; overwhelming stress, frustration, and immense sadness watching my mother decline as, little by little, she began losing her quality of life. She was depressed and frustrated, but she was motivated and determined to get back on the golf course once again, and I was committed to doing everything I could to help her get there.

I was in California in the middle of running a live training event for one of my clients. I got a text from my brother Kevin that said, "Call me when you have some time to talk." My brother rarely called to just talk. I immediately sensed that something was wrong. I called him on our lunch break. He asked me to sit down and just listen. I heard him tell me about his persistent headaches, a myriad of test results, an oncology referral, metastases and cancer staging. "With your healthcare background in oncology, I know you know the odds aren't good, but it's important to me that I fight them. It's also important to me that you're there when I tell Mom about my diagnosis. Will you please do that for me? Will you fly to Florida over the next week or so and be there when I tell her?"

His news took my breath away. He was my younger brother. He had a successful career, a beautiful home, a wife, two teenagers and terminal brain cancer. As soon as we hung up, I rerouted my return flight home to New Hampshire, and a few days later, I flew into the Sarasota-Bradenton airport. I traveled a lot, and Mom and Dad were always happy to see me for my surprise visits, so it was as if nothing was wrong. We enjoyed a lovely dinner together. We looked at some family pictures Mom had found, and she was excited as she told me about her progress in physical therapy. She had hope again, and I was grateful to share it with her, knowing that the next day, her hope would most likely be shattered.

The next day I watched her bright blue eyes go from dancing and happy, hearing Kevin's voice on the phone, to glazed and solemn as he shared his news. She stayed strong for him, but she hung up the phone and sat on the couch and simply stared at his picture hanging on the den wall. She had no words. She had no tears. She was in shock. After a while she announced that she was going to lie down. An hour later I went in to check on her.

She was lying across her bed, surrounded by crumpled up tissues with tears streaming down her face. I lay quietly with her for what seemed like forever. She finally spoke, "I don't think he's going to make it through this. I need to be on the Other Side for him. I'm ready to leave this life."

I remember being shocked at her words but I also remember promising to support her, whatever she decided. A few days later Mom stopped all treatments. Eventually she stopped eating. Ultimately she was admitted to hospice. She was at peace with her de-

cision to die and, as difficult as it was, I was at peace with my decision to support her. I will always be grateful for the time she and I spent together and for lots of joyful moments we shared as she neared the end. At some point in the midst it all, I made a decision that no matter what was happening around me, I needed to do three things:

- 1) Take time each day to spend some time focusing only on my breath.
- 2) Take time each day to reflect on what I am grateful for.
- 3) Do something intentionally each day that brings me joy.

Before these practices became a habit, I had to set an alarm on my phone with reminders:

- 1) Take three deep breaths now!
- 2) Make a list of five things you are grateful for in this moment!
- 3) Look for joy NOW!
- 4) It's time to go find the sunset!

Despite all the challenges, I began to notice that my conversations with my Mom, my family members, healthcare providers and strangers were more present and connected. I enjoyed daily sunsets at beach. I noticed families walking together, children playing, birds dancing along the shore and the feeling of the breeze on my face as the sun put on its spectacular show. Sometimes I expanded that joy by stopping for ice cream on the way back to face whatever was happening.

September 27, 2018 was no different. I spent the day at Mom's bedside. She was non-responsive but, according to the nurses, still holding on and not showing any signs of transitioning. I was exhausted. As much as I wanted my Mom to hold on, I was finally ready for her to let go. My alarm went off to remind me that it was time to head to the beach to watch the sunset. I welcomed the break from the daily bedside ritual.

I always went to the beach, but that evening I automatically headed to DeSoto Park. I hadn't been there in years. As I parked the car and walked to the water, I felt drawn to the very same bench I had sat on with my Aunt Barbara over twenty years before. She had long since passed. My Mom needed her help. I sat on the bench and talked to her. I asked her to come help her sister. I asked her to guide my Mom through a peaceful transition, with grace and ease and without fear.

Tears streamed down my face as I reflected on the finality of losing my Mom. Suddenly I felt an immense sense of peace come over me. In that instant, a manatee popped out of the water right in front of where I was sitting. I got goose bumps all over my body. I laughed out loud as the manatee put on the same show it had put on for me and my Aunt over twenty years before. The sun began to set. I can still remember the gratitude and joy I felt in that moment at the very same time I was feeling sadness over the imminent loss of my Mom.

A few moments later, I felt a sudden urge to return to the Hospice House. Her nurse met me at the door and told me that Mom had begun her transition. I called Dad and my brother Keith. We all witnessed Mom take her last breath. We watched in amazement as a soft, peaceful look came over her face as her spirit left her body and moved into the corner of the room where she had often told me the spirits were waiting for her. I'm sure Aunt Barbara was there.

My heart broke with the reality of losing my Mom, but at the same time, I felt incredible joy for bearing witness to the entire experience and for fully understanding of the power of a mother's love for her children. I'm sure Mom was there to meet Kevin when he passed six months later.

I still practice deep breathing, gratitude and joy in my daily life. I still experience challenges, sadness, grief and fear. We all do. However, I've discovered what I have come to know, that these practices help me stay connected to joy, no matter what. I've learned that sadness, grief and fear can coexist with gratitude, love and joy. We can experience each of them separately, all of them together, or we can chose which one we'd like to focus on in any given moment. We get to choose!

I invite you to consider that the key to fully enjoying the magic life has to offer lies in living in gratitude, love and joy. I've found that these questions help me get there, especially during life's challenges. I hope they help you too.

- What if it's all perfect just the way it is?
- What if the challenges we face in life are simply to serve our learning, growing and becoming our best selves?
- What if, in times of difficulty, the only question we ask is, "What opportunity is there in this experience for me to learn and grow?"
- What if the only thing we do is focus on becoming fully present wherever we are while focusing on just one thing we are grateful for in that moment?
- What if we kept a list of some simple things that bring us joy and intentionally decide to do one of those things to intentionally raise our vibration in the moment?
- What if we strive to approach each and every day like Winnie the Pooh does?

*"What day is it?" Pooh asked.  
Piglet answered, "It's today."  
Pooh said, "My favorite day!"*