My mom’s legacy: Letters from Odessa, a penchant for theatre, and eternal optimism.

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To accompany someone through death and dying is indeed an affirmation of life. I believe that the art of compassion manifests through illness and dis-ease. Death and dying are part of our natural aging process, however masked, they are in technological ‘advances’. At the very end, one dies alone and in silence, in a very individual process of mixing one’s endurance and fatigue: the palette of end-of-life. Paradoxically, silence expresses a cornucopia of words.

I am swimming in a sea of emotions through the impact of bereavement in motherless daughters. I am reflecting on my mother’s widowhood since 1999, shyly revisiting my own (as my partner passed away in 2001), and finally, my mom’s passing on September 7th, 2013 — a mere month ago. Part of me needs to escape into a safe area where regulation of turmoil via analysis of the psychosocial elements of resilience and healing and through a relation to one’s culture of origin as one of the tenets of adaptability. Yet, another part of me yearns for creativity in raw solitude. I believe art can be used as an elegy for freedom and choice that mourns many losses while seducing us into questioning what we hold true.

My mom and I shared many values: books, ideas, romantic French songs, and food! As I write this, I have, in front of my desk, a list of Russian words to describe the type of bread we both loved, the best way to prepare a cold salmon salad, how to tell when a prune and apple marmalade is ready to be tasted, and, best of all, the word for Iranian dates! Who is now going to share my love for figs, warm apple strudel, and an irrational love for Jewish poetry? Immune to psychiatric diagnosis, my mom certainly knew extreme emotions, yet under a calm façade. Shared stories about a furtive actor from Odessa, family secrets, and even the unspoken truth about her early years were the subjects of our long conversation, one that lasted a decade. I mourn today that mother, the one I had for the last ten years. My last mom, my ambiguous mirror, my fractured self.

I write over and over again my mom’s name: Esther Juana (Jane) Magid. I still see her emoting over Gringoire, and enjoying the last author she ever re-read: Cortazar, of course. I look at the only ring her family brought from Nazi Europe: Yes, mom, for once I will be a dutiful daughter and will keep my promise, yes…

I think it is crucial to help those who are ending their journey, but perhaps more so, it is crucial to follow up with their survivors, both in terms of mental health and resilience. Widowhood and orphanhood are never-ending processes of ‘moving through’ and revisiting that segment of one’s life that died with the loved one. A sense of impeding catastrophe led my mom and me to undetermined emotional places where ancestral human bonding took place (including an embracing, on my part, of my fragile neophyte self that was in urgent need of cognitive re-structuring).

Thus, I find myself presently sane and collected enough to be able (and willing) to contain both mom’s dreams and my nightmares connected in their both having started during two similar oncological embodiments. Cancer exists in a space of far more
questions than answers. Love you mom, always. Please come and visit me, I won’t be afraid.

This paper is dedicated to my grandchild, Daniela Jane Johnson, born on that synchronistic date, September 7th.

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