

FROM ORPHAN TO GRANDMOTHER  
INITIATION INTO CRONEHOOD  
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It was seven years since her promise to let me know when her time was here. Now, she was fulfilling that promise as she had so many others before in our long, rich, often tumultuous life together. In April, 1996, after a seven-year cycle battling major heart disease, emphysema and thyroid cancer, my beloved mother was telling me her time to die had come. She had eighty-one years to make the transition. I, at fifty-one, would now have the rest of my life to adjust to living without her.

Sometimes a rock, sometimes a ball and chain, most times a deep, archetypal root, Carolyn was not only my mother, she was role model and skill sergeant (the “do-as-I-say” not “do-as-I-do” version,) loyal advocate, staunch critic (“...you’re crazy” being her favorite euphemism in any disagreement,) best friend and life-long teacher (some lessons she wished I hadn’t learned- most, she secretly applauded.) German by ancestry and orphaned at eighteen, my Mom was a strong-willed, determined survivor for whom family came first and financial security second. I remember an astrologer once called her a “woman before her time,” referring to her proclivity for independence and strength. Her most deeply rooted and rarely (if ever) expressed emotion was fear, which she ingeniously camouflaged with intense loyalty, outrageous humor and undeniable loving. If my mother loved you, you were her favorite. If you crossed her, she would always get even. Her sense of justice was as unique as her sense of spirit.

Mom’s presence filled the hearts of those of us who loved her. Central to any family gathering or social function, her strong opinions and sarcastic humor laced the most difficult situations with “lightness” and brevity. The co-parenting she provided during my early years of single motherhood and the loyal grandparent she was to my daughters throughout their lives can never be replaced. Her absence creates a tremendous void. While it may seem foolish to use the word “orphan” to describe a grown woman who has recently lost her mother and whose father passed away almost twenty years ago, the

archetype of orphan resonates in my soul. Along with it the wave of concomitant and feelings of loneliness, pain, yearning, confusion and transition. This feels more like the proverbial “empty nest” syndrome than any feelings associated with my children growing up and leaving our family home. Even the joy experienced in my eldest daughter’s recent news of pregnancy is colored by the heightened feelings of missing my mother. Moving into the role of orphan and grandmother almost simultaneously seems a monumental transition.

The questions of: “Who am I?” and “What do I want?”, answered successfully so many years before, once again loom loudly in my inner heart. They resonate somewhere deep in my soul and psyche sounding more like meditation than questions, like mantra more than mandate. *What is my soul’s destiny. How will God(dess) direct my journey now.?* I only know that in the seven short years of preparation for death and therefore, full participation in life, Mom and I partnered each other, and now I am alone... with sacred adult choices. Although I have completed many life tasks (i.e., educating myself, raising two beautiful daughters, building a successful career, “completing” therapy, facilitating others’ healing and burying both my parents,) I now feel scared to face the unknown...yet again.

Faith, courage and personal discipline have become my intimate soulmates in managing this major life transition. Even these do not make the pain of loss disappear ( I hear only time performs this magic), yet they soften the intense edges and deepen the spiritual perspective of life on earth. While taking the path of brave action has been somehow easy for me, embracing the practice of discipline has note. As I stumble along (practicing yoga, meditation, walking, journal-writing, avoiding toxins and praying,) I remember the voice of a beloved teacher saying, *Spirituality without daily discipline is nothing more than a hobby.* I have discovered that to remain centered during loss, transition or chaos, discipline is a must, and time to feel and heal... a necessity. I find myself quieter and seeking solitude these days, more compassionate with the “perfectly imperfect” human experience, and more accepting of “life on life’s terms.”

Mom prepared me for life and for death. Her advice to seek educational and teaching pursuits to always “have something to fall

back on” (lest her plan for my destiny as full-time wife and mother should mysteriously disappear) while double-edged at the surface, served as a deep survival root in my life. Following Mom’s advice (as did all “good girls” from Brooklyn) provided me with independence and fortitude...excellent oars on life’s high seas. Her preparation for death included a pre-arranged and prepaid funeral, a Living Will, copious notes in where everything was, which of her belongings went to whom, what actions my brother and I were to take if she was to become incompetent or in extreme pain, and letters that we co-wrote thanking her doctors for all their skill and care. In her last year, Mom even managed (at my specific request) to knit (her trademark) two baby sweaters to be put away for her future great-grandchildren. Mom’s style of spirituality was to “always be prepared.” At first, I resisted all her systematizing, thinking it had no heart. Later, I partnered her in making sure there were no “loose ends,” which for me felt like movement into soul. To ease her discomfort, I monitored my sadness and fear and expressed them when I was not in my mother’s presence. Four months after her death, I appreciate her foresight, as not a day goes by that I do not refer to those notes to handle the voluminous business of death and dying. Currently, I am finding my own style of life-management less compulsive, yet similarly thorough, especially now that I honor its value and import for those left behind.

I have come to realize that the subtle difference between “grieving” and “mourning” is differentiated through conscious communication, completing unfinished business and celebrating life. In the absence of these three things (as is most times the case) death merges with regrets and unfulfilled desires, often catapulting those left behind into a depressed state of mourning for closure. Although I grieve my mother’s presence, I am aware that we were blessed to share these gifts of communication, celebration and completion. After her first major heart attack, Mom and I knew “she was on borrowed time” and we made the most of it. From visiting places and people we loved, camel-riding in the desert of Africa and visiting exotic cities of her dreams (Marrakech and Casa Blanca), to the simpler daily life of cooking/shopping together and scheduling doctors’/hospital appointments, Mom taught me how to enjoy life, making each day an occasion to celebrate something. I am left now only to imagine how she would rejoice at the prospect of great-grandmotherhood.

I still don't know how to wake up in the morning without missing my mother's voice, even telling me what to do (most annoying) or her physical presence in my life (most comforting). I still don't know exactly how to be mother to adult daughters (unobtrusive, yet consistently supportive), and I have never before been a grandmother. While my inner little girl misses her Mommy, and my budding grandmother grieves the loss of her own mother to help navigate this new and unfamiliar territory, the grown woman-in-me knows my mother's passing is part of a much larger design. And whether I like it or not, I have the choice to use her passing as yet another initiation rite... a scared ritual in my own movement towards cronehood and an opportunity to honor the Great Mother inside us all.

Remembering my childhood spent living on the top floor of a Brooklyn apartment building, I can still hear the thunderous sound of the rain on the roof above and the howling intensity of the winds below throughout the winter months. Oftentimes, during the stormy season, the electricity would shut down and we would be without light. The candles that my mother always lit during these times of darkness provided comfort from the storm. It is in my own dimly lit transition from orphan to grandmother that I will now carry her memory in my heart, light my own candles and once again... follow her lead.