

A Eulogy For My Mother

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EDNA FUERTH LEMLE

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For the first 58 years of my life, I would have to say that my relationship to my mother was a complex and difficult one. She was a huge personality, full of great passions, creativity, rages, and generosity. I remember saying to friends that I loved my mother in small doses, but that she didn't come in small doses. She was a force of nature.

She had no sense of boundaries; my memory of going to restaurants with Edna, was that as the waiter placed my plate in front of me, her fork would be in my food before I was even able to lift my own. She would often just show up at my house anywhere in the world, uninvited.

She was also very controlling. After experiencing the trauma of her own mother's death when she was just 11-she felt the survival need to control everything and everybody around her.

As my siblings and I were growing up, one didn't really have a conversation with my mother; she kind of gave lectures to you. We even had shorthand for them: LFTs or Lecture for Today.

At the same time, she was also very creative and innovative. She wrote, she painted, having a one-woman show of her work in New York and Paris; She was very involved with trying to bring more peace to the world, so she worked with the UN, and with the Foreign Policy Association. She thought the world would be more peaceful if we all shared a common holiday, so she invented her own world holiday, Gratitude Day. She was innovative, and in many ways far ahead of her time. For instance, when she saw her teenaged children carrying their heavy schoolbooks against their chests, or in heavy brief cases, she imported knapsacks from Switzerland in which to carry books. You can see how that idea caught on. She saw the pilots zipping around the airport in Copenhagen on scooters, and imported those.

She also made things fun. I remember I had flat feet as a child, so she would make a game of throwing marbles all over the living room and we would have a contest to see who could pick up the most marbles with our toes. There was a round bed in the living room. There was lots of laughter with Edna.

She also loved parties. I spent my senior year of High School in Hawaii, at the Punahou School. Just before graduation, I told my classmates that if anyone going East to college did not have a place to go for Thanksgiving, they were welcome to come to our house in New York. 38 people came for the weekend. They all slept over, and there were bodies everywhere. My mother loved it.

To those people that she loved, she was immensely generous. I daresay everyone in this room has been touched by her generosity. Her symbol for Gratitude Day, and for her life, was the cornucopia, the symbol of endless bounty and giving. And she lived that too.

Our relationship began to change 10 years ago, when I made a movie about her, called "EDNA The Movie." I was entrusted with her story.

Also, as she got older, she began to soften. Just over 5 years ago, I got a call at 5:30 in the morning from one of her caregivers in Hawaii. She said that my mother was in the emergency room with a high fever, accelerated heart rate, no blood pressure, and pneumonia. I said, "I'm coming." When I was changing planes in San Francisco, I got a call on my cell phone from a dear friend of mine and my mother's, a doctor Chery Garvy who loved my mother for over 40 years. She said to me, "When you get to the Island, don't go to the hotel first. Come right to the hospital. I think we're looking at hours now." I said, "Chery, I have a 6 hour flight ahead of me. Whisper in her ear that I am coming, and she damn well better wait." Chery did. My mother waited. I arrived in Hawaii, and went directly to the hospital and held her hand for the next 8 days.

It was during that time that our relationship was transformed. She could no longer control anything. But we sat, we talked, and she even sang to me. It was as if she had what the Buddhist call her "Original Face." The face you have before you are born. She was sweet, beautiful, radiant and loving, and that was how I felt about her. During that week of being alone with her, I got to tell her I loved her, and how much I appreciated all that she had done for me and my family. Everyone, except her, thought that she was dying, so I said all the things I thought I might never have the chance to say again. One afternoon, I was sitting by her bed, holding her hand. She had her eyes closed. I told her I loved her, I thanked her. I told her we all loved having her around, but if things got to the point where she wanted to go, that it was OK. She would be missed, but that where she was going was safe, and that she would be loved there and loved here. She didn't move. I said, "Mom, I love you and I want you to know that I forgive you for all the ways you may have hurt me inadvertently." She didn't move; not even an eyelash, but I heard her voice clearly through telepathy: "Forgive me for what? What did I do?" I laughed. Perfect Edna. Bless her heart, still in character.

After that, she stabilized, and decided to stick around for her 90th birthday. That was 5 years ago. She died 6 days after her 95th birthday last week. During the last 5 years I made about 25 trips out to see her. It had become so sweet.

I was blessed to be with her over the last days of her life, and to be there when she passed. Chery Garvy was there as well, literally around the clock for the last 2 days of my mother's life. In the last few hours of her life, her children and grandchildren told her that they loved her. I played the movie I made about her for her 85th birthday, so she could hear all of her children and grandchildren, her son-in-law, Robbie Bosnak, and friends like Ella Kline who is here with us today, tell her they loved her, and appreciated her. And, she could hear herself, in her own voice, clear and strong telling her own story, and giving her testament. At the end, mom was courageous, and sweet, and bathed in love as she passed.

I am grateful that we got to spend time together during the past 5 years, and that I was given the opportunity to heal the difficulties of the first 58 years of our relationship, and now to end in a place of deep love and appreciation for a remarkable woman. Edna, you'll be missed.

Mickey Lemle is an award-winning writer, director, and producer. He founded Lemle Pictures, which specializes in producing films with spiritual, environmental, and socially conscious themes. Phillip Glass composed the music for his film about the Dalai Lama, "Compassion in Exile". It is screened somewhere in the world every single day. One of Lemle's most recent projects was shot in Bhutan by special invitation of the queen.

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