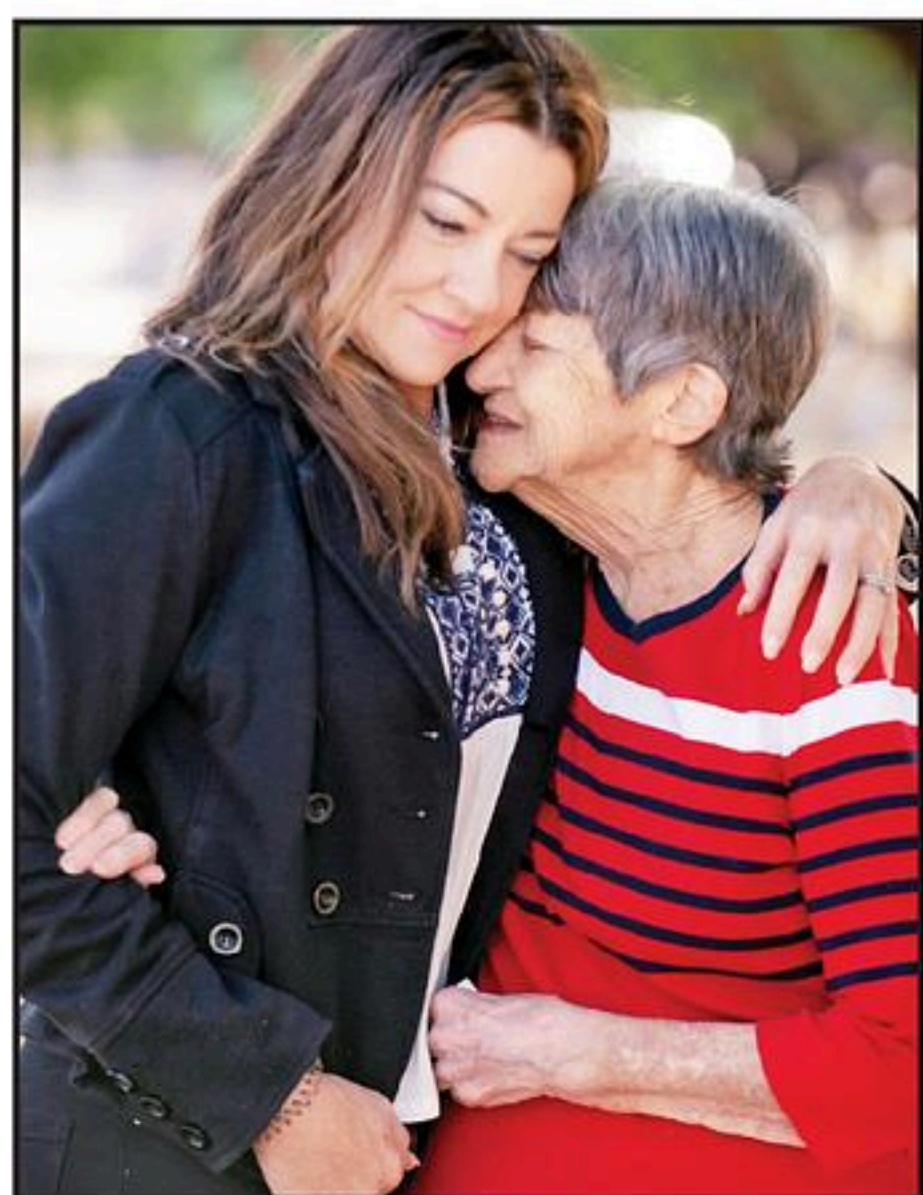


For Mom on her day: 'Thank you for being you'

By Barbi Walker-Walsh

She knows I'm here before I step up to knock on her door. She's sitting at her kitchen table, watching for me through her front window. Her wide smile is brighter than the cheery pink tee that engulfs her petite frame. "Hello, darlin'!"



Emily Carroll Photography

Why does she always say that? Like she's still in the South, is beyond me. I try not to let it irritate me too much. "Hi! Do you have any pink cans?"

"My refrigerator glows pink."

She was not kidding. The entire bottom half is filled with pastel pink cans of Whole

Foods rosé Presto. "I've been collecting them to bribe you guys to come over." She's laughing, but she's also not kidding.

Now we're both laughing, but good grief. Is this what my 80-year-old mother does now? Ordering Whole Foods online and having them deliver mine

and my husband's happy hour beverages so she can bribe us to come over.

Sad. For all of us.

Now, I am ashamed. My mother was mostly a shut-in since the pandemic began. Other than her two stints in the hospital, one for surgery and immediately after back to the emergency room, She really hadn't gone anywhere or done much.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I'd ride my cruiser to my mother's every afternoon to visit and walk her. She had abdominal surgery to remove an enormous tumor caused by non-invasive cancer. She also had COPD. Walking every day was a necessity for her. Thanks to the pandemic, I had time to both walk her and viscerally contemplate her death.

We reconnected again, as friends, during those times and kept some of the routine long after vaccinations, lockdowns, and a hybrid return to normal life. Only now that her demise wasn't imminent and life returned to normal, I didn't see her as often.

I grab a couple of cans, pop the tab and set them on the table.

She shuffles over and sits down. I see she's been reading an actual book. She's excited to discuss it but sees my impatience and puts it aside...

That's an excerpt from an assignment of mine with my mother while I was in grad school nearly three years ago.

What I would give to have those moments with her again.

This Mother's Day, I find myself navigating the unfamiliar territory of being without my mother. Although I am forever grateful that I had so much time to spend with her before she passed away, I subconsciously thought she'd live forever. Naive, I know, but isn't that how we see our mothers? Always in the background of our lives.

My mother, Jerry, whose name was as unique as her spirit, passed away last September. Writing about her feels like both a tribute and a pilgrimage through the myriad lessons she imparted. I wouldn't be the person I am today if it weren't for how she mothered me. My mother had the kindest spirit of anyone I'd ever known. She was genuinely curious about the people she met and always asked thoughtful questions. Maybe she should've been a journalist. Even in her last days, she'd ask about the nurses and aides and others who cared for her. She wanted to know about them and their lives.

But that's who she was. My mother embodied compassion, kindness and curiosity. She worked hard not to judge and was quick to apologize if she misspoke.

At her celebration of life, tales of her empathy echoed throughout. Like the time she silenced a

teen who was mocking an elderly man for the way he walked. My mother claimed the elderly man was her father. The teen was stunned into silence.

Moments later, my mother revealed the truth but left a lasting lesson: treat everyone with kindness; they may be another person's loved one. That friend never forgot the lesson.

Years later, she expanded on that theme when, in the early days of my career as a flight attendant, I complained about some passengers' neediness. My mother kindly said the same thing to me: Remember that if they don't have someone in their life who loves them, maybe you should be the one for them at that moment. Be kind to that person in that instant.

Not only did she reinforce the need for me to be compassionate, but it was also probably among the best bits of advice I've ever gotten. It's stuck with me ever since. Her empathy was boundless. She believed everyone deserves respect and kindness—principles that defined her.

Although the pandemic brought challenges for her, it also presented us with the gift of time together. My son, husband and I would ride our bikes to visit her every week. We played cards and created more memories—another important part of what mattered to her. While I pursued my dream at NYU's online journalism master's program, she became both my muse and interviewee. We delved into her life, laughed, and shared moments that now provide the foundation of my memories. Her experiences and the way she viewed the world reshaped my understanding of her.

In caring for her as she struggled through her last days, I realized that she was stronger than I'd ever given her credit for. Two days before she passed away, my son got into a car accident. He called while I was with her. As I walked him through the process of what to do, my mother sat up in bed, her hair wild and glued to her face, and said, "Oh, s...! Let's go get him." She adored my child probably more than she did me. He had been her world. She'd helped raise him and it was at that moment I realized a mother is always a mother, even in those dying moments.

In those last hours, holding her hand and telling her how much I loved her, I had no idea how much I would miss her. She was with me when I came into this world of course, and I am forever grateful I was with her when she left it.

As I reflect on what it means to be without my beautiful, kind and funny mother this year, I realize that there are not enough words or space to write about what she meant to me and others. Her essence was simple yet profound.

This Mother's Day, I celebrate my mom, Jerry—a woman whose strengths defied norms and whose heart knew no bounds.