

NEWS FROM ANNA

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A DEATH IN MY FAMILY...

[The following is a tribute to my dear sister - my biggest fan and my mentor in life. May she truly rest in peace.]

My oldest sister, Pat, died last month of complications of Parkinson's disease and its unique form of dementia. She had lived a life filled with heartbreak and hard times. Yet, she had withstood every challenge, smiled through her many tears and always had a warm greeting for others.

When I got the call that she was in the last stages of her life, I hurried to get there, needing to make sure that I had the chance for that last goodbye. As it turned out I had a week with her and spent much of every one of those days and all of the nights staying with her in her room at the nursing home where she has resided for the last four years. And so began an adventure that I could never have imagined and one that I will treasure for the rest of my life.

My adventure began with the airline – no! Not that kind of horror story adventure we all too often associate with travel by air. I was given a special 'bereavement' package that not only saved me a couple hundred dollars on the cost of the ticket but because I could not say when I might be returning made the ticket fully refundable and exchangeable for as many times as I might need to change it. (That number ultimately was FOUR times!) Every call I made to the airline and every employee I encountered (even if they were in India or wherever) was enormously understanding and sympathetic.

Then I got to the hotel where my other sister and I had taken a room so we could get away for some much needed breaks (and where she stayed while I stayed with Pat at night). There the desk clerks, the morning breakfast lady, the housekeeping staff all quickly picked up on the situation and went out of their way to offer comfort and support – cleaning our room at times convenient for us, offering their form of a bereavement rate, keeping our options open to remain in the same room extra nights without having to move and just checking

up on us at breakfast or as we came and went to make sure we were doing okay.

But it was the staff at the nursing home that truly blew me away. My main memory of the home (although I had visited Pat there several times over the years) had been the memory of the first day I brought Pat there – she came there directly after a head injury that resulted in her being in the hospital ICU for a couple of weeks and ended all hope that she could return to the assisted living facility she had been living in. In the span of just six months her living arrangements had gone from living independently in her own one-bedroom apartment to a shoulder injury that required surgery and long months of rehab to moving into a much smaller space in the assisted living wing to several falls leading to visits to the ER to the fall that brought her to the hospital and ICU and on to a room shared with a total stranger in a nursing home.

I will never forget the sheer terror on her face that first night. I sat with her all night and tried to reassure her. The next day other family came and I went home to Wisconsin and my job there and so her 'new' life began. Remembering that so vividly I had announced to my husband that if Pat had to die she was not going to do it surrounded by a bunch of strangers. Little did I know...

The staff at the nursing home had in so many ways become Pat's extended family. She was a tiny lady with a mischievous elfin-like smile and everyone who came in contact with her came to love her. And during those long nights when she would momentarily open her eyes and seem to know I was there, I noticed that what she really responded to were the voices of the nursing assistants and nurses caring for her. There was no doubt that she recognized them as safe, caring friends and she willingly gave herself over to their care. And as they cared for her they told me "Pat" stories – things she had done that made them smile or laugh, times when she had stood her ground, and especially times when this former second-grade teacher had pointed her finger at one or another of them and suggested they might need a 'timeout.' One night a young woman came to the room at around three a.m. I did not recognize her but she told me she worked on another floor and had just heard that Pat was dying and had come to say goodbye. "She was my first resident when I started work here," the young woman told me. "She was very special to me."

There are many many stories to tell but to complete Pat's story (and my adventure) allow me to take you to the funeral itself. Pat had not for sometime been active in her church because of her many illnesses and injuries. So in choosing a minister we chose the current minister of her church in our hometown (where she was to be buried). This young man had never known Pat or any of us for that matter since by now the family had scattered from that hometown. He spent over two hours sitting with Pat's son gathering stories about her and at the funeral he delivered a eulogy that focused on her always teaching in all facets of her life. It was so eloquent and so captured the spirit of who she had been in life that there wasn't a dry eye in the place. At the cemetery he told a funny story we had shared with him and then asked if anyone else had a story to share.

Her eldest son stood up and told the following story; "When I was about sixteen and chafing under the rules my parents had set for us, I grumbled aloud one day that living in that house was like living in a prison. Mom didn't say a word, just went about doing the things she did on a Saturday morning. At lunchtime when we all took our places at the table, every place but one had a plate piled high with her good cooking. At my place there was a plain paper plate with two pieces of white bread and a glass of water."

That was my sister – a teacher throughout her life and my personal guru when it came to making my way through whatever adversity might come my way. In the end the love she longed for all her life surrounded her and gently brought her to the end of her troubled life here on earth – and (I've no doubt of this) into the far more peaceful and joyous afterlife she so richly deserved.

If you have suffered the loss of a loved one I hope you will find blessings in the life that person lived and in the lives he or she touched – that ripple effect (as Pat showed me) can turn strangers into family. Peace and blessings... Anna