

Mrs. Nancy Reagan's Funeral Service
Patti Davis's Remarks
March 11, 2016

In the months before my father died, my mother repeated often that she had to be there at his last moment. Her determination was ferocious. She simply had to be at his side when he left this world. I said the only thing I could think of and what I thought my father would say, that "It was in God's hands." She was there and occasionally I've thought that even God might not have the guts to argue with Nancy Reagan. As her own health declined, she was quite adamant and vocal about reuniting with my father on the other side after her passing. I am hoping for God's peace of mind that she got her wish.

My parents were two halves of a circle—closed tight around a world in which their love for each other was the only sustenance they needed. While they might venture out and include others in their orbit, no one truly crossed the boundary into the space they held as theirs. I saw this exquisitely portrayed in front of me one summer evening when I was a teenager. We used to rent a beach house at Trancas for a few weeks in the summer. And on this evening, with a vivid sunset streaked across the sky, I looked out and saw my parents sitting on the sand, close together, heads tilted in conversation. There was so much vastness around them—the blue Pacific, the orange and pink sky, miles of white sand. And then there was the circle of their own private world, as clear as if it had been traced around them—indestructible, impenetrable, an island for two.

I knew I would carry that image with me the rest of my life. When my father was shot and my mother rushed to the hospital, they at first wouldn't let her see him. "I have to!" She said. "You don't understand how it is with us."

The moment before my father died, he opened his eyes, which had been closed for days, and he looked straight at my mother. The circle was drawn again as he left this world.

In the weeks after he died, my mother thought she heard his footsteps coming down the hall late at night. She said he would appear to her long after midnight sitting on the edge of the bed. I don't know anything about the possible passages between this world and the next, but I do know her faith in these visits eased some of her loneliness. They made her feel that he was close by.

On one occasion I am quite certain that she was channeling my father. I had gone up to her house and found her very busy making phone calls to elected officials trying to gain their support for stem cell legislation—something she was quite passionate about. She ended one phone call and gave me a somber look.

"Well," she said in a calm tone sounding much more like my father than herself, "Karl Rove is dogging my phone calls. Everyone I call he calls right after and tries to get them to oppose stem cell legislation."

"Right after?" I asked. "Are you sure your phone isn't bugged?"

"No, I had the secret service check on that."

"You must be furious!" I told her, puzzled by the fact that she didn't seem furious at all.

She shook her head, "No." And her entire demeanor was not only calm, it was practically Zen.

Even people who never met my mother will know that she word 'Zen' has never before been applied to Nancy Reagan. But that was what I saw.

"There's no time to get upset," she said. "There's work to be done, I can't get distracted. I have to keep moving forward."

I admit I did say, "Who are you and what have you done with my mother?"

Over time, what she referred to as late night visits from my father ceased. She no longer heard his footsteps in the hall. But she never stopped missing him. She told me once that the reason she had the television on all the time was because it filled the house with sound and made her feel less lonely.

Another remedy for her loneliness was to fill the empty spaces with stories and memories. A few days before she died, I reminded her of something that happened many decades ago when we lived in Pacific Palisades. My father used to get massages from a large Eastern European man, who would come to the house and set up his massage table in my parent's dressing room. On one of these days as my father lay face down on the table, my mother tip-toed in, kissed him lightly on the back of his neck, and tip-toed out. He didn't know it was her. But he went through with the rest of the massage, never said a word, and after the masseur left, he said to my mother, "I don't think we can have him back anymore."

"Why?" she asked him, "What happened?"

"Well, he kissed me."

When she told him it was her, he was flooded with relief and said, "Thank God, I didn't know what to do!"

My mother's laughter in remembering that day would, unbeknownst to me, turn out to be the last time I would hear her laugh.

It's no secret that my mother and I had a challenging and often contentious relationship. When I was a child I imagined having warm, comfortable conversations with her—the kind of conversations that feel like lamplight. The reality was far different. I tried her patience and she intimidated me. We were never mild with one another, whether we were distant and angry or bonded and close. Our emotions burned up the color chart. Nothing was ever grey. But there were moments in our history when all that was going on between us was love. I choose to remember those moments.

I choose to remember the mother who held together the gaping wound on the back of her young daughter's head after she fell at a friend's house and cracked her skull open on the fireplace hearth. She drove with one hand and held my head with the other talking soothingly to me and trying to conceal the fear in her eyes. Watching her was hypnotic. It made my head hurt less.

I choose to remember my mother framed by the window of a New York hotel room as I told her that I'd been involved in a complicated relationship for two years and had now been cruelly tossed aside. I was 19. I felt older and more wounded than any 19-year-old should feel. I needed a mother and I came to mine, holding out a fragile hope that she would keep me from crumbling beyond recognition. She did. She didn't judge me, she wasn't punishing or accusatory, she was tender and understanding and loving.

I choose to remember walking with her along the beach at Trancas. Somehow the ocean always calmed the air between us and allowed us to be easy with each other.

Most of all, I will remember looking out the window to the sweep of sunset and seeing my parents sitting together on the sand.

Maybe on the other side, there are endless shores and eternally brilliant sunsets. Maybe it's possible to sit there forever, undisturbed, two souls happily entwined, needing only each other. Robert Sexton wrote, "Across the years I will walk with you in deep green forests, on shores of sand. And when our time on earth is through, in heaven, too, you will have my hand."

I hope for my parents that those words don't live only in the poet's imagination, but are a map to what they both longed for and believed in, in the world beyond this one.