

**Printed In The
Washington AMTA Massage Journal
Fall 2007**

Giving Away Everything I Know

It started with a picture. I was having a professional portrait by this amazing man who made it easy. He used his computer to show me his shots and he moved through them quickly, so I saw it for just a few seconds. It was her smirk, my sister's smirk (click on Video Interview to see this picture). The sob came quickly.

The plane had just landed at Sea-Tac airport. My head was full of ideas from a massage conference, my soul was full of promise from a conversation with my publisher, and my heart was full from a visit with my son and daughter-in-law. I turned on my cell phone to find 5 new messages. They came from my nephew, who never calls. I called him.

"Hello."

"Mitch, this is Taya."

"Your sister died last night."

"F___, what happened?" I responded.

"They found her in her recliner, dead," he said flatly.

My diaphragm went into spasm. I hardly had enough air to say, "I can't talk right now." I stood in the aisle of the airplane waiting to disembark with the tears wetting my face making the other passengers uncomfortable.

As I walked the long way to the luggage area, I cried. I didn't try to hide it I just let myself cry. No one stopped me or asked if I needed help. I guess they knew at some deep level that I just needed to cry. Many phone calls later all I really found out was, they found her in her recliner, dead.

Patricia, my sister, is or had just turned 64, and is 10 years older than me. In a rural county north of Seattle, she had owned and operated a classy salon that catered to the rich. She was a workaholic and spent more time with her clients than she did with her two sons. Two years earlier, her oldest son, Kent, convinced her to retire and move to Bozeman, Montana and live in the apartment that was connected to an adult care home he owned. Kent, an RN, lived a couple of hours away in an apartment connected to another of his adult care homes.

With the TV on, Patricia would snooze in her recliner all night and was responsible for the residents. Her assistant, a very tiny Pomeranian, with a bell around her neck, would alert her to any movement. She would usually sleep until the late morning, so when the staff came to make

breakfast, they looked in and thought she was sleeping. It wasn't until later they realized she was dead.

My heart ached because we had just begun to reconnect. Over the years, we had spent hours talking about our mother's strange mood swings and how they had affected each of us differently. We had agreed that if either one of us started acting crazy like our mother, we would tell the other. About 10 years ago Patricia had begun to act like our Mother. When it happened, I froze. She was "mad" at me one day while I was in her salon, and cut all my hair to ½ inch to let me know it. But what she was mad about, I never found out. She just started acting like our passive-aggressive-angry-loony mother. I couldn't bring myself to tell her, because I was afraid she would hate me, so I just stopped making contact.

About this same time, our Mother began to lose her ability to speak sentences and we thought she was having a series of small strokes. She was animated but could only speak a word or two out of every sentence. When she accidentally put menthol ointment on some open sores, Dad finally had to call 911. The hospital was able to treat her sores and then they diagnosed her with Alzheimer's disease. The disease had progressed so far that Mom died within three weeks. Then Dad began to tell us the whole truth.

Mom had known she was failing and had deliberately moved them to a rural setting four hours away from all of us, with the closest accommodations 40 minutes away. Dad did not tell us kids what was going on because he had made a promise to take care of her so she would not be put into a nursing home. Many times Mom did not know Dad and was paranoid enough to threaten him with a machete.

My mom wasn't having strokes she had Alzheimer's disease. How did I miss that? How did I not see? I began to play the memory tapes in my head looking for the signs. I am the youngest, and my mom was in her fifties by the time I was in high school. She always had trouble expressing herself, often starting in the middle of a thought. In order for me to make sense of what she was trying to say, I would have to keep listening until I had enough information to edit it and understand. But through her disease, Mom also gave me the gift of reading people by their tone of voice, cadence, body language, and listening to everything a person says.

After her death, I read a book on Alzheimer's disease. There is no blood test or brain scan to determine if I have it. I learned that to be absolutely certain they would need to do an autopsy of my brain, which means I am dead. I also learned that the brain breaks down in the reverse of how it develops. So just like Merlin, I have the comfort of knowing that I am getting younger.

When I replay those tapes of Mom in my head, I see the signs. I really had to think about it and embrace it because being in denial was not going to help me. I have had serious conversations with my son and daughter-in-law to let them know I probably have Alzheimer's and what signs they should look for in my behavior. While I am of sound mind, I have told them that they are not to take care of me and I will be happy to be placed in a nursing home.

Dad came to live with my brother and we all had a great two years with him. He died peacefully at 91 1/2. Mom had told us her birth certificate records had been burned in a fire but we found papers that showed she was really older than Dad so she was also 91 at her death.

This all happened before my sister's death so I had already made my peace with having Alzheimer's. When my sister died, my brother and I wanted an autopsy, but her son, the RN, would not authorize it nor would they authorize the family to place a notice in the county paper where her salon was located. They did not even hold a memorial service and I was angry with my nephews for a long time.

My sister is, I mean was, only ten years older. From my portrait, I saw my sister's smirk and I got her message: "You may only have 10 more years to live, so what are you going to do with them?"

My sister-in-law (and best friend from high school) recently asked me, how I was feeling about my sister's death. "Are you still angry about not having a service for her?"

"No," I responded, "In her memory I am making use of every day in a way that I never did before. I have figured out that I have to put down some of those old emotional issues that I can't change and get on with it, with life."

I have finally found my mission: ***To give away everything I've learned in the 30 years of being a Massage Therapist.*** This is my tribute to my sister; this is how I will honor her, not with a funeral but by living my life as completely, deliberately, and intensely as possible. I am not afraid to die, I am not afraid of Alzheimer's. I am only afraid there is not enough time to share with you everything I've learned before I am gone.

So this is my first column where I will share my career of mistakes and successes. I call it: The Musings of an Old Therapist. And since this is new for me, email me with your thoughts, ideas, and constructive criticism.

Sincerely,

Taya Countryma LMP

haptics@comcast.net