

Surrendering to Healing



Gratitude is
being whipped by pain
and emerging in grace
being scarred by loss
and experiencing joy another day
aching for relief and finding peace
being reflective about the past
and leaping unshackled into the future
consuming the moments
and feeling the bliss of letting go

– Nicole Salmon (July 29, 2019)

Within days of ringing in the promise of a new year, our family received the first warning sign that this year, 2017, was going to be one that would shake our family's foundation like nothing had before. Of course, the full magnitude of the quake that was going to ripple through our lives forever wasn't quite known at the time, but somehow we felt un-nerved.

In early February, on what would have been my dad's birthday, my siblings and I got confirmation that our family was going to lose the person whose constant presence in our lives, whose warmth and comfort we could always count on, whose determination and strength raised seven children with our dad, whose humor and laughter, whose ... , whose ... , whose ... , whose ...

We knew Mom's diagnosis before she did, and as we stood in the doctor's office wondering if telling her would rob her, and us, of precious weeks together, our family doctor simply offered, "Her soul already knows, and with limited time, reconciliation between her soul and consciousness is critical as she journeys closer to death." Then and there, we knew what we had to do. Mom deserved no less.

As was normally the case, and attempting not to alarm her, my sister and I, who usually accompanied her to all of her medical appointments, drove Mom to the doctor's office to receive her test results. Unbeknownst to Mom, as we sat waiting for her doctor to share the news, my other sister, brother and sister-in-law sat outside in my brother's car, awaiting our text for them to join us in the office once the diagnosis had been shared. Within minutes, we were all together in the office. As the news sank in for Mom, a tear ran down her cheek. She looked over at her "babies," weeping in pain, and in typical Mom style, she uttered a few words that comforted us and made us laugh during a moment when laughter seemed inconceivable.

“You guys are much too greedy. You have had me for 95+ years,” she said. She laughed, and in that moment, our mom fell so easily and naturally into a familiar role, immediately turning her attention to comforting and soothing her babies as we sobbed and cried. She was letting us know that we were going to be OK, because together we were going to get through this.

Months after her 96th birthday, Mom took her last breath as she lived her life—in her home, surrounded by a family who loved her so intensely and would now have to figure out how to move forward in a world where she wasn’t around to comfort us at the time we needed her most. We yearned to be showered by her love, wrapped in her warmth and soothed by her voice and laughter. Just like that, our family anchor, connector and superglue was gone.

Twelve hours after her passing, I shared the news with family and friends with this social media post:

The ties that bind us last well beyond our presence in this world. Shortly after 12:30AM this morning, Mom took flight from this world to the next. Mom’s life can best be described as an ever-expanding tapestry of love. Mom is and was and always will be a phenomenal woman who blessed us with an enduring spirit and strength, amazing laughter and so many stories to last well beyond her 95-3/4 years. A woman of strong faith and belief in God, you gave this world pure love and as you approached the end of your journey on earth, you reaped it all back and then some. Our family is enormously grateful and blessed for the gift of you.

Exactly on the one-year anniversary of her death, our family welcomed her seventh great-grandchild, a little girl who will hear stories and one day watch videos of her G-GMA. She will one day come to know the origins of her middle name. Knowing Mom, we are not surprised that, even in death, she somehow orchestrated events in such a way that the date of her death is a reminder to celebrate life. It’s a simple message that grieving and healing are not mutually exclusive.

Over six years ago, when I stepped away as head of fundraising for an international development organization, I had no clear vision about what was up next for me in terms of my career. However, I had clarity about one thing. Whatever I decided to do, it had to afford me the time and flexibility to spend as much time as I could with my mom. She wasn’t ill or anything, but she was in her early 90s, and as she so often reminded us with a chuckle, she wouldn’t be around forever. I knew this was the window to maximize the time we spent together.

Fund development consulting was the path I chose that allowed me to have so much precious time with her. She lived with me and one of my sisters. We ate breakfast together and talked about family stuff, world stuff, funny stuff—just about any stuff. Around the same time, I couldn't ignore the strong desire I began to have to give back and reconnect to community. My previous role had been demanding, and other than with family, I didn't feel I had the capacity for meaningful volunteer engagement. Venturing into consulting opened the door, allowing me to satisfy my growing urge to give back, engage and build relationships and strong connections.

Mom and I were never disconnected, and I can't say our bond grew stronger over the last few years of her life. Our connection muscle had been well developed over a lifetime. I was her "wash-belly," a term indicating that I had been the last child to leave her womb. I had a front-row seat to a woman who always seemed to have an amazing capacity to give more, to connect more and to love more. Here was a woman who lived through deep loss: her parents, my dad, my brother, all her siblings and many of her friends. Somehow, she absorbed those life blows while remaining open and receptive to life's joys. I didn't know or feel it at the time, but my family and I had lived in the presence of someone whose life served as a model for how to heal.

Since losing her, I miss a lot of things about Mom. While I can look at pictures and videos of her antics, I do miss her physical presence, her wisdom, her smile, her laugh, her warmth, her stories, her ... , her ... , and her ...

Most of all, I miss her natural, easy and sincere ability to connect.

Today, I crave connection and can't help but wonder if the seeds to helping me heal from her loss were sewn many years ago, from a place I didn't quite recognize. My soul has always known, and now my body has surrendered to my truth. My path to healing runs through giving and connecting.



*Nicole Salmon with her mom, Jessie
Amherstburg, Ontario, Canada
June 2014*

An avid reader, gardener and sports enthusiast, Nicole Salmon is anchored by family and a deep appreciation of strong personal relationships. She embraces her natural curiosity and thirst for variety and new challenges. She has spent the majority of her professional life working within the nonprofit sector and has over 25 years of fundraising and senior leadership experience. In 2014 Nicole founded Boundless Philanthropy, a fundraising consultancy specializing in providing transitional leadership support, fund development strategizing, planning and execution. Currently, she is working with Peel Leadership Centre as manager, organizational development, helping to build strong leadership and organizational capacity within Peel Region in Ontario, Canada.