

Jo's Journey

2. The Mirror - Depression, Anger and Bargaining

It's amazing how a single object can be there in the background, taken for granted, used every day, needed every day and yet can go unnoticed and seem to be forgotten, yet when it's gone, you're at a loss. Over the years, the large mahogany framed mirror had hung reliably in the hall of my parent's house and had become part of the fabric, without it, there would have been a 'gap', a huge void, it completed the hall somehow. Every day, we would all pass by it and stop, and through our vanity ask, 'Is my hair ok?', 'Does this necklace go with this top?' 'Are there any herbs in my teeth after that pizza?'...yes, we'd all passed by it over the years looking for its approval and it had seen us grow but now, we were asking it something different. 'Do my eyes look puffy?', 'Has my eyeliner run?.. Will he be able to tell I've been crying?' 'Is my nose pink and puffy after all the tears?'...yes, even my brothers stopped there before going into dad to check that the signs of their pain were well hidden from dad as the news of his diagnosis was sinking in. We were all trying to protect him as he was trying to protect us from his melancholy mood and the impact of the realisation that he'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness. One never knows how to broach the subject. We didn't realise that there was support out there for us and people we could just talk to.

We did not know what to expect, what lay ahead and every time we tried to get information, it was to no avail or the answers were vague. It was frustrating. The only thing we could cling to was the 'operation' that could 'give us more time'. I was always sceptical, but mum and the others clung desperately to the hope that there would be several more holidays together. Needless to say, having found ourselves in this position, quite unexpectedly, this period was traumatic. Dad hated hospitals, but he faced them bravely and I really do think that there is truth in the saying that through pain we grow, for in facing the fears, gave us strength, pulled us together and we were united. In hospital, dad made a very close friend who had the same diagnosis. His operation was a huge success, sadly dad's wasn't as his illness was quite advanced. He had plodded on for quite some time in silence before we were aware of the symptoms. His surgeon described him as a truly stoical man. At the time, we wondered whether this traumatic period of tests and hospital visits would never end (we know now that it did and was followed by a lovely period that has left us with many treasured memories). We challenged the specialists, surely there was something that could be done? In this case, chemotherapy statistically MAY have only granted and extra two months. It was interesting and very touching to see that dad based his decision not to have it only with our approval. It was as though he felt obliged to be seen to be 'trying' despite his fears and the possible side effects. The agreement and his decision was that the quality of life was of paramount importance.

Needless to say, I set about making protein packed soups and as I have an interest in crystals, laid amethyst, citrine and carnelian all around for their supposed 'healing' properties which could apparently slow the development of cancer and green calcite to ease breathing. We all had our own way of trying to fight the inevitable. During one of our woodland walks as dad wanted to keep his fitness levels as high as possible, he tried to force himself to run up a steep incline...it was soul destroying to see his disappointment, but the autumn leaves slipped beneath him which made it impossible.

I decided to move into the family home so that someone would be there at all times, after all, the household bills still had to be paid and with dad's salary gone, it was going to be tight so mum had to continue with her shifts. Again, we had no idea of the benefits to

which we were entitled. My employer was brilliant in offering flexibility as was my sister's but it didn't stop the resentment of having to 'race to live' and wanting to treasure every moment without the interference and inconvenience of having to go to work. Mind you, dad would say that I 'did his head in' if I spent too much time with him!...he always had a way with words!

We had frantically put together our own 'bucket list' where we planned to do all the things we wanted to and make his 'dreams come true'. He was a lover of birds and he had always wanted to see the puffins. It seemed ridiculous that for all those years, they had been there, only a boat ride away and he'd never done it and suddenly, we were desperately trying to book a trip before they migrated as we did not know what the next year would bring when the birds returned. He marvelled at the sight as he found himself surrounded by them...that was unforgettable. Our trip to Snowdonia was wonderful too. Somehow, everything seemed more beautiful to us through our new eyes in not taking life for granted. It felt like there was a 'sword of Damocles' hanging over us, not knowing how and when his illness would progress. I know now how nature has a way of telling you. He got frustrated one particular time and said, 'I don't know how to plan my life, I don't even know whether to start reading a thick book or if I should just stick to short ones!' I passed him War and Peace and said, 'Get started on that, I have a few more for you too...by the way, none of us do!'

We knew at the time how we were feeling, but never knew how dad was coping with coming to terms with it. We imagined that the victim's was a very lonely place and were not aware that there were people he could talk to (not that it would have been his 'cup of tea'). He said one night that the only person who truly understood how he felt was his friend, the gentleman he met in hospital. We only knew his first name and the town in which he lived and so we put a cryptic advert in his local rag. To our amazement, the vague message had reached him and before we knew it, they were chatting on the 'phone.

Of course there was resentment and bitterness at times, 'why me', 'look at that old chap, 'flaunting' his health!'... I even found myself feeling jealousy when I saw ladies linking their more mature fathers. Dad said that he wished he'd never taken the job that would do this to him. It did seem so unfair that it was a hard day's work that sealed his fate...if only they were aware of the dangers of asbestos back then, if only they had the special masks...my dad would see his grandchildren grow. When he spoke like this, we would all try and overcome these feelings of anger knowing how lucky we were to at least be given notice and time, that he hadn't been a victim of an accident years ago, that he had in fact survived his car accident. It did not remove the pain though and we continued focussing on the here and now.

We heard of a place that we could borrow a wheelchair at no cost. The problem is, that in this position, if you've not been made aware of your entitlements, one can struggle financially and the cost of equipment is huge. We struggled with guilt that this was even a consideration but the wheelchair did provide us with many opportunities. Unfortunately, at the time, we were not aware of the whole range of life improving gadgets that were available to us at no cost. When dad saw the chair, he resented it and wanted it out of his sight. It is always a shock to have to adjust so suddenly. However, he knew that thousands of people faced the same realisation every day, those who were much younger than him...children and so he came to terms with it and before we knew it, we were out in the forests seeking out his woodpecker.

As he walked through the hall one day, dad stopped at the mirror, looking closely. I thought he was taking note of his weight loss. Then he turned to me and said, 'Do you think, if I break this mirror, I'll get seven years bad luck?' I shook my head and he stamped his foot, shook his fist and said, ' Damn It! I thought I'd sussed it.' His sense of humour had returned.