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Letting go is a series of simple gifts

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Reader comments: "My mom died around the same time and that column was so touching and true." Judy Wendler, St. Clair Shores

Even in dying my mother taught me lessons.

My brothers and I moved in with her and Dad three weeks ago, a day after she baked our favorite coffee cake. She also made golabki, Polish cabbage rolls, lying down every few minutes to rest.

We savored the food even as we watched her fade until she wasn't even able to suck water through a straw. But I know this, and I know my brothers agree: Taking care of Mom in her last days was the most profound experience of our lives.

All pretenses and defenses fell. I saw my mother's essence, and my brothers'.

Engineers for a living, they became the most tender of nurses, to her and each other. My mother wanted ice water, so dozens of times each day, every time the ice melted, my brothers refilled her glass mug, encouraging her to sip, or squeezing a few teaspoons into her mouth through a plastic syringe.

At my age, I should be smarter about this but I thought dying was quiet and elegant, as in the movies. Instead it's jerky, fitful, bewildering.

I kept expecting Mom to make memorable pronouncements about the meaning of life and death. Instead, she said "Oh boy. Oh boy." She said "God help me."

She asked why dying took so long. She sighed. She cried.

Once, when I reminded her of the joy she'd find in heaven and the old, familiar faces she'd see, she answered, "Who cares?"

She hated to leave us. Knowing that, everything I said to calm her sounded to me like platitudes.

Step by step

I learned that grief isn't linear. So many times I thought I reached the final stage of acceptance. My eyes were dry for hours. Then despair kicked back in.

Or I'd accept a certain loss -- that Mom couldn't wash her hair anymore -- and confront the next day a new one -- that she couldn't comb it, either.

And when my mother lifted her limp hand to touch my face, I couldn't stand the pain and wondered, "Why did no one prepare me for this?" I tried to be rational. I was about to join the biggest club in the world: People Who've Lost a Parent. I told myself that millions of others have survived this, and so would I.

But all the intellectualizing didn't shrink the hurt or fill the hole.

Gestures of comfort

I've hesitated in the past to call people who I knew were at a loved one's deathbed. I won't anymore. Every call and note we got as Mom was dying reminded me that the universe is a family, that we share each others' aches.

Choosing to speak is more significant than the words we choose.

What we do counts, too.

On the evening of my mother's funeral, my brother took a phone call from a neighbor who told him she'd like to bring breakfast by in the morning. "I know you probably have a houseful of people," she said. "What time would be best to drop it off?"

In the morning, we woke up surprisingly eager. At the appointed hour she arrived wearing oven mitts and delivered, hot from the oven, an egg-cheese-sausage casserole that we wolfed down to the last speck. From that neighbor I learned how a simple promise can lift soggy spirits.

My friends who joined the Big Club before me say my mother's death will change me forever. Already I'm dizzy, as if everything's moving around inside me.

I thought I knew what those friends were going through. But I didn't. I couldn't.

Now I can. And that's a gift.