

#### 4. Gifts of the Practice

Editor's Note: *Marcy's father died recently, rather unexpectedly, and she has been spending quite a bit of time helping her elderly mother adjust to a life without her husband. The topic came up in a coaching call with a practitioner who is also facing issues with her own aging mother. Marcy offered the practitioner a "practice perspective" based on her own experience.*

My mom is having a really hard time, both with self-care and day-to-day things like managing her bills and finances. She lives by herself in their condo in Sun City, which is a part of Phoenix. I have gone twice since my father died to stay with her and help her with the transition to a life without him. Both visits have been very challenging but have also offered opportunities for insight and growth in the practice.

I noticed a couple of things on my last visit. One was that an intense presence manifests while I am with my mom. I saw it more clearly after I came back because when I'm with my mom, there's no break, I'm "on" every waking moment. The other thing was being thankful that I can do it. Actually, thankful doesn't seem like the right word - it's more like relieved or glad, glad that it's not a problem. It's very unpleasant, there's nothing fun about what I'm doing, but there's nothing in my body that registers that I have a choice, so there's not much resistance, only "this is what I need to do."

Years ago I knew my relationship with my parents was not good, and I was afraid of how that was going to play out. "What am I going to do when they need help? Am I going to be able to live with myself? Am I going to be able to show up in a way that makes me feel like a decent human being?" I was afraid of those things because I always wanted to be a good person. I knew that things were getting better, but you don't really know what's going to happen until it happens.

And that's it, I really couldn't have hoped for anything better. There was never a question in my mind whether I needed to go see my dad when he was hospitalized. There was nothing in the way when he died, even though it was horrible and there were a lot of bad things that happened, I never felt like I didn't do what I needed to do. There was no unfinished business that could have been finished. It was clear.

People talk about, "Oh the regret," and "I wish and I wish," and I didn't have any of that. I feel bad for my parents, they had a lot of sorrow and pain and unnecessary suffering that was not mine to relieve. I'm clear on all of that, and I'm glad that I can show up for my mom, who is still suffering.

Trips to help my mom are short because of the many other demands on my time, and they require that I be as high functioning as possible while I am with her. What I noticed in the first couple of days after I got back home from my last trip was that I was feeling weird, like re-entry after an intense retreat or sesshin. What I put together about that was I'm so focused and

present all day, every day, when I'm with my mom, it's like I'm on a retreat. So when I come back from that, I feel the disorientation that can arise after an intensive practice period.

But after a few days back at home, a lightness began to build, I felt a real contentment, this happiness was coming up. I was trying to place what was happening, and one thing I found was that I have a very long-standing habit of trying to figure out what's wrong with me, and trying to be better or be different. If I'm tired, why am I tired? I shouldn't be tired, or I should have more energy, or I wonder if I should be friendlier. Why am I forgetting things? Maybe something's wrong with my brain. I just have this background program that always looks for something wrong with me.

There was a gift from spending several intense days being fully present with my mom despite how difficult it was. I realized, all of a sudden, that I'm unable to entertain, right now, the idea that anything is wrong with me. In fact, I am high functioning, really high functioning, and now I'm seeing this close-up.

There's a lot going on because part of this, too, was that I had recently attended a sesshin, an intense practice period at a Zen temple, and I already had a sense of not really having a future, and a sense of increased happiness because I was unable to entertain a thought about wanting something later, in the future. If I don't want more, if I don't need something to be different, that cuts out a huge amount of suffering, not to have a future. If you don't have a future, you can't have fear.

So, the intensity of the visits to my mom has brought a lot of gifts with it. But I'm acutely aware that intensity is not a gift if you don't have a practice, in fact, if you don't have a strong practice. Without a strong practice, intensity is just hell and that's it. But for me, when something intense comes up, the practice rises to meet it, and then I'm automatically practicing at that intense level. It carries over into sleep, too - when I'm sleeping, the sleeping is more intense - it's practice all day, practice all night.