

My COVID-19 Story

by Diane Mulder

The Hardest Part

“This is surreal. I cannot wrap my mental arms around what is happening. I need to pull over. I’m not sure it’s safe for me to be driving.”

Three hours earlier I had brought my mom to the ER at St E’s hospital in Lincoln, NE. It had been a long week and I was in need of help. It was Wednesday April 15th, 2020.

We had known the pandemic was coming. I had seen the concerning videos from China at the start of the year and wondered why we weren’t talking about it more here in the states. In February, my son Joseph, a sophomore at UT-Austin, told me “I don’t know, mom, this one just feels different. If it ends up being a thing, I’m gonna figure out a way to get up to Nebraska so I can ride it out up there.” I immediately stocked up my farmhouse. If it ended up being nothing, at least I’d be ready for summer.

By April, we had fully hunkered down. Joseph was still with us following the death of my father the previous month in early March. His college had gone through a series of extended closures for spring break before ultimately moving all their classes to online. We set up the farm house for Mom to stay with us in case it got to the point of being quarantined. We limited our outings; did our grocery store shopping at 6:30am to avoid the crowds; wore our masks; wore gloves; used lots of hand sanitizer.

When Mom got done helping us mow the lawn on Wednesday, April 9th, we had no idea something was about to go terribly wrong. It had been dry, and mowing that day was especially dirty and dusty. We were all going to eat dinner together that night, so mom asked if I would run her back to Firth so she could clean up before mealtime. It was at her house she told me what was to be my first missed-cue: “thanks for driving me back...I’m not sure it would’ve been good for me to be behind the wheel.”

By Thursday, she had a cough. The kind that was typical following a dusty mowing event. I cautioned her to take it seriously. The last thing she needed was for that to turn into bronchitis or worse, pneumonia. She assured me she was fine, just resting a lot. Friday noon we popped in to check on her. “Resting fine...” was not how I would’ve described it. “Sleep coma” was more like it.

I began to worry for her. Her symptoms now tracked like when she was having trouble with her heart. She had just lost her husband of 61 years, and I knew with her heart condition worse than dad’s, it was possible we could soon be losing her as well. She never reported any pain or discomfort. She just slept. All the time.

I tried calling her Dr on Monday, but they were closed. I called on Tuesday and was told the first available (phone) appointment would be on Wednesday. The next day, Her doctor confirmed our suspicions of bronchitis and asked us to go to the ER at St. E. for a chest Xray and blood draw so he could be certain which medicine to prescribe.

We arrived at the ER and I was told I would be waiting in the parking lot. I explained to the nurse that when her heart acted up, she would seem coherent, but would report later she didn't remember anything during the event. Given she was in a similar state, I told the nurse she was not able to advocate for herself. I let her know my father had recently passed (and would not be available), and gave her my medical POA paperwork so they could speak directly with me regarding her care. Three hours later, the nurse emerged out to the parking to inform me they were admitting her. She asked for mom's cell phone and battery charger. The nurse was insistent a doctor would call me in a few minutes and refused to give any other information. She did offer to let me say "goodbye" through her ER window but when I did, I could tell mom had no idea why they had turned the bed. Her confusion was already that great.

I was absolutely in disbelief. A few short months ago, we had been in this same ER with dad. Now it had swallowed up my mom. I didn't know what was wrong with her. I didn't know if I'd ever see her again. I didn't know if I would ever hug her again. I didn't know if I would ever be able to tell her again how much I loved her.

I tried to drive away, but quickly realized I couldn't. My brain was overwhelmed by what had just happened. I knew it wasn't safe for me to drive. I pulled into a nearby parking lot and let the tears flow.

And if I thought I was overwhelmed trying to drive away from St. E's that day.... I had no idea. I've been asked at times to talk about what was the "hardest part" of our Covid journey? Truth is, there was no one "hardest" part. Every part was the hardest part. And there were a lot of them. All happening simultaneously during that 6-week time frame.

The Diagnosis

a mule just kicked me in the chest...

I'll never forget that moment when the hospital case manager told me mom had tested positive for Covid-19. I felt like a mule had just kicked me in the chest. I tried my best to stay connected in the moment so I could hear her instructions. I remember being told a representative from the infectious disease department would be conducting an investigation; I should have a list ready of everyone mom had been in contact with the past 7 days. I don't remember much more of her call that day. I was literally stunned. I was struggling to breathe. Covid had just landed at my front door.

The diagnosis meant odds were high the virus would take the life of my mother. She was in the high risk category given her age in the 80's and her underlying heart issues. But I also had to face the reality that my son and I were now at risk of dying from the virus as well. I couldn't imagine a world where I would bury my father, my mother AND my son within months of each other. How would I find the strength each day to live? And what if the virus took me? I feared for my son having to bury his grandparents and his mother back-to-back. Every fiber of my being wanted to spare him that unimaginable pain.

For the most part, I'm not scared of my own death. But in this moment, I saw death in a whole new light and it scared the pants off me. God had given me the grace to face dying. I would need a whole other level of grace to face living if it meant being without any of my immediate family. And a level of grace even greater for my son if being alone were to be his fate instead of mine. I cried out to God to save us.

Communication with the Community

igniting the forest fire...

I immediately put a list together of everyone mom had been in contact with the previous 7 days and contacted them to let them know they had been exposed to the virus:

- 1) Me
- 2) My son
- 3) My uncle

Fortunately, the list was small. But I knew I had a much bigger problem. My mother is a private person, and this was her protected medical information. But it was also a global pandemic that had shut down the world. The community had a right to know as this impacted their health as well. Our little community is particularly efficient at sharing news. Especially news as big as this. I knew with one call, I would ignite a forest fire.

I waited a full 24 hours before calling my uncle again. He, too, is private, and I wanted his OK about notifying family before I started making calls. He agreed we needed to tell others and so I placed my first call to my cousin. In many ways, our uncle is like a father to him and he needed to know ASAP. From there, my next call was to the person I knew had been with my mother within the past 14 days. This was a good friend of hers who had come to her home to sew face masks together. While I was on the phone with her, I could hear her cell phone ringing in the background. She was receiving an incoming call to let her know my mom had tested positive.

The next morning, I was awakened by a call with one of the first questions being "is your mother on a ventilator?" My heart and mind were still raw and this call/question hit me hard. I don't blame the caller. In fact, I love her dearly. But that moment was beyond difficult. As were all the

other following moments where I was asked how she was doing. For the most part, I had little I could share. But in a small town community where everyone lives life together, this dynamic of staying connected is both the thing I adore and the thing that became exceptionally difficult. I tried my best. I truly wanted to connect with all the people who loved my mom and were concerned if she would make it. But the burden was great. So many people. So many communications. The calls and texts and messages were nonstop. Especially in those first few days.

I also received push back on what care my mother “should be” receiving. I found this part tough as well. The virus was so new, even the doctors weren’t sure what the one approved course of treatment should be. I did not find it helpful to be told what latest Facebook meme or Google search was smarter than the team of professionals who were tending to her care. Again, I balance all this to say, I knew people were scared. And wanting very much to be helpful. In spite of the pain in the moment, I was grateful they cared enough to call.

At one point, mom’s Covid diagnosis even became a topic on the local FB group for the town residents. The author of the post did not disclose her name, but watching the storm erupting in the comments that followed was gut wrenching. The next morning I opened FB with a knot in my stomach. To my relief, the post had been removed.

To my church family: I am beyond grateful for your being there for us during this time. Thank you to Pastor Mark and to Beth for forwarding my emails to you all. I desperately needed your prayers, and to that end, you blew it outta the park. I intentionally kept the emails vague because of my mother’s privacy, and I apologize for leaving you all in the dark. Thank you for rising to the occasion in spite of the lack of information. The Church is truly people sharing the love of Jesus. And in the midst of the global pandemic, you really shone. Thank you....

Communication with the Hospital

God, please be her advocate...

I left the ER that first day confident in the knowledge that a doctor would soon be calling me. Because even with a pandemic, the doctor tells you what’s going on, right? Nope.

24 hours later, I still had not heard from a doctor. My first call was from the hospital case worker letting me know mom had been admitted “for observation”. This was not good. If she ended up needing additional care after leaving the hospital, the lack of the admission designation would prove to be a very expensive outcome because of the rules surrounding Medicare. I asked the caseworker why I had been told she was being “admitted” the previous day by the ER nurse and was only now finding out it was for observation only. There was no answer. I told her about dad’s recent passing and that I was to be the primary contact person for her. The case worker

said none of this information had been entered in their computer so she updated everything while we were on the phone.

I tried calling the nurses in charge of her care. The young man who took the call finished most of his sentences with a change in pitch that made everything sound like it was a question. He informed me she was doing well? and was giving them lots of feedback to help them direct her care? When I told him she hadn't eaten yet, that she didn't know most of the details regarding her time there, he began to express doubt that getting information directly from her was a good idea? When I told him they needed to be consulting with me (not her) he informed me there were no POA papers and they would be unable (legally) to talk with me?

Needless to say, I was popping a royal cork by this point. I had given all the necessary paperwork to the admitting ER nurse and I demanded they find them. I firmly told the young man my father/my mother's husband of 61 years, had recently passed and I was the person they needed to be talking with. I was frustrated beyond words. The young man located the missing papers and assured me he was updating the computer?

The next day, I got a call from a frantic nurse: they had been trying all day to reach my father to discuss my mom's care and had been unable to get him on the phone. Was everything OK? Yeh....no, it's not. He's dead. And she was far from the first person I had given that information to within their hospital. Once again, I had to relay the information that dad was recently deceased, that they had my medical POA to care for mom, and that they needed to talk to me. By this point, my confidence in their ability to care for her was waning.

During this time I called mom's primary care doctor and asked if they had heard anything from the hospital. They too had not gotten any test results back from the ER and were wondering what was happening with mom. They promised they would call the hospital and assured me they likely had the inroads to get the information we wanted. They later called me and instead of news about my mom, gave me an even more sobering report: the new reality of hospital care during a global pandemic. I was heartbroken at what I heard. They were in the trenches up there far deeper than I could've ever imagined and I had only made things worse with my pushy phone calls and demands on their time.

They told me the doctors and nurses were being stretched thin beyond anything they had ever experienced. Many were being asked to cover positions beyond their roles as a doctor or a nurse. They were required to suit up in full PPE before entering any room with a Covid patient. Without the benefit of family being able to be with the patient, they had the additional responsibility of communicating with all the family members separate from the conversation that occurred in the room. If for some reason a patient had a device with video capability, this was a huge blessing. The doctors could include the family on the visit while in the room. But where this was not possible, the staff would have to leave the room, completely disrobe, attempt phoning the family, give them an update, and then robe up again in full PPE to enter the next room. I was told to be patient and to cut them a large measure of grace. They were doing their best and were spending long difficult days on the front lines being exposed to the virus. They

were being asked to hold patients' hands as they died. They were trying to keep all the family members informed. They were doing battle on a whole new battlefield.

The doctor did end up calling me. But he didn't have any information to share beyond the O2 stats, etc. the nurses had already given me.

Communication from the hospital ended up coming about once a day. If we were lucky. The only information we typically received were stats about oxygen levels and the occasional update regarding organ functions, such as kidney and liver. There was no information regarding whether she was getting better or worse. I would eventually figure out they wouldn't answer that question because they simply did not know.

I also learned that the "old" rules about how doctors are the only ones who could talk with you about your loved ones medical situation - that was gone. And apparently even the nurses weren't the new frontline for information. It got to the point that even some young gal who sounded barely 18 could call and give updates. It was a sign of how thin they were being stretched. But it was hard because it made me feel even that more removed from what was happening to her.

I ended up being the one to tell mom she had tested positive for Covid. That was really tough. I hated having to be the one to give her the news that meant most likely she would die. She may have been told by the hospital staff, but she said they only had told her they were moving her to another room. I guess if anyone was to deliver news as somber as this, it was best that it came from me. I want my relationship with her to be able to accommodate the tough talks. I had no idea it would include something as huge as this.

It was incredibly scary to know my mother was in the hospital for an illness with no known path for being cured, and I was on the "outside", unable to be a part of it in any way. I started begging God to be her advocate up there in the hospital - on the floors, in her room, in the ears of her nurses, and most importantly, in the ears of her doctors. I begged him to tell them what they needed to do, and how to best care for her. At this point I needed God in a way I would've never imagined before and I was desperate for Him to step in and be there for her in all the ways I couldn't. And more.

Saying Good-Bye

I felt his tears running down my arms...

Good-Bye #1:

The call came at 2:30am on Sunday morning. They were moving mom to ICU and placing her on a ventilator. They told me they had asked her if it was OK to do this and she had agreed. I doubted in the moment that she had even been aware of what they had been saying to her. I wondered if perhaps God was speaking through her to direct the staff as to her care.

I was told they would call again in 30 minutes so we could speak with her one last time before going on the vent, but I knew the real message was “to say our goodbyes”. I flew to the basement and woke up Joseph. I wanted both of us on the phone when that call came in. My mind was frantic. I didn’t know what I would say to her! Just yesterday I had been on the phone with her and everything seemed like she was doing “ok”. She had told me she was not in any pain of any sort. Hadn’t been yet to date. She just couldn’t stay awake. We had joked that if she were the first person to sleep through the coronavirus, that wouldn’t be a total bad thing. I had been told by the staff they had gotten her walking in her room and that, too, seemed like it was a good thing. And now I had but a few minutes to prepare to tell her goodbye???

In the end, I found it impossible to tell her “goodbye”. Instead, I just kept telling her I loved her. I told her that just before she went under, to tell herself “this is not my time to die”. I told her she needed to fight and to stay strong. She told us she loved us but I could tell by her voice she was gone. I was certain she was completely unaware what was happening, and I just prayed that our words would find their way into her spirit somehow and make a difference.

The call ended and I simply sat there in silence. Tears were flowing down my face. My heart and soul had been speared and I had a gaping wound in my chest. I made it back upstairs but there was no way I was going back to sleep. I needed help and I knew it. I waited a few hours, and then typed out my first email to Pastor Mark. It was time. I had to tell our church family what was happening because we needed their prayers. Writing that email was hard. I had to walk that thin line between protecting her privacy on one end, and yet saying enough to convey the urgency without saying too much that would spark panic within the community. I also didn’t want the communication to attract the attention of a local news team. The last thing we wanted was even more publicity.

From there we sat and waited. Statistically speaking, odds were not in her favor. I don’t remember the exact number now, but it was something like less than 7% of the people with her age/underlying health conditions were surviving the vent.

Good-Bye #2:

Three days later I got the call mom was coming off the vent. In that time, I had learned about vent numbers and what it represented in terms of the amount of oxygen she was requiring. I spoke with the doctors and nurses enough to know her kidney and liver functions were stable. So when I got the call that Wednesday morning telling me they were pulling mom off the vent, I was elated! She had survived the vent! What joy!! My heart soared. Finally, the first spot of good news I could sink my teeth into.

That all came crashing down a few moments later when the nurse asked me something to the effect of “what are your end-of-life wishes should she not be well enough to make it on her own?”

What did she mean “what were my end-of-life wishes for her”? I promise you, I felt the weight of a thousand bricks land in my hand in that moment. I had always lived with the knowledge that with mom’s heart as bad, if not worse, than dad’s, that she, too would pass from heart failure. Never once in my wildest imagination did I think for a moment that it would land on me, and me alone, to have to be the one to make the decision if she were to live or die. I knew intellectually that life support was not what she wanted, but in the raw horror of that moment, I also knew whether her spirit stayed with us or went home to Jesus was a decision I alone would have to make.

I wisely told the nurse I needed more information to make such an ominous decision and asked that a doctor call me back to discuss further. My next call was to a close friend who is married to a doctor. I needed her medical perspective and I needed to know which questions to ask. Ultimately, she would advise me that the best decision would be the one I could live with best because the consequences would be mine to bear. She also spoke a lot of hard truth that mom was likely not going to make it and it was ok to let her go.

The doctor called me shortly thereafter and we discussed where she was at. Odds were high she was not strong enough and was not going to win this battle against the virus. The vent was only good for so long and at some point, the help it was providing did not offset the problems it could cause. If she were unable to breathe on her own, they could place her back on the vent and within a few days they would know for certain whether she was going to survive or not. They had asked her what she wanted and she had said she didn’t want to go back on it. Again, I doubted whether that had been her speaking or God speaking through her. I asked the doctor if it were really fair to her to put her body through all that (going back on the vent) just so we could be even more positive about an outcome that we were already pretty much sure about already. He agreed it probably wouldn’t tell us anything more than we knew already. And with that, I made the decision that we would not put her back on the vent. We would sit tight for the next few hours and wait and see if she was going to make it or not.

And as we had thought, within a few hours we got our answer. She was declining quickly. She wasn’t going to survive. They put us on the phone with her to say our goodbyes. I told her how proud of her I was; how much I loved her; how she had been a really great mom. Joseph had

his chance to say his goodbyes to her and my heart was breaking into a million pieces watching him. Joseph had been so close to his grandparents all his life and in two months, he was losing both of them. I told mom it was ok to go and to run at full speed into the arms of Jesus.

The hospital changed her status to Comfort Care to allow her to pass peacefully without pain. A nurse got on the line to explain what that meant exactly, but at that point, I couldn't process any of what she was saying. I did hear the word "euthanasia". I knew the context was that it wasn't....but in all the words she was saying, fate would have it that one word would be what I would hear.

Good-Bye #3:

Mom was moved from ICU back to the Covid ward so they could have the room available for the next patient needing high level care. I was advised she would likely pass over night. Her oxygen levels plummeted. We knew it wouldn't be long.

Wednesday night turned into Thursday. And somehow, against all odds, into Friday. By this point, I began to have two major regrets: 1) I hadn't once prayed with my mom over her journey into heaven 2) her wish had always been to have the Hallelujah chorus from Handel's Messiah played at her funeral, and I regretted I hadn't been able to give her that song one last time before she crossed over.

Friday afternoon, we were given our chance. The hospital called saying they wanted to set up a zoom call so we could see mom one last time. But instead of taking time to do the logistics of a zoom, they found an iPhone and within moments we were on a FaceTime live video with her. Joseph and I got our chance to pray with her one last time. And then we told her we had a special gift for her. Joseph had the Hallelujah chorus queued up on his iPhone and we hit the play button. The majestic chorus streamed through the live feed and we watched as her face responded, ever so slightly, to every swell and turn of the piece.

Her lips were turning black. The fact that she was even responding at all was beyond a miracle to us. We had been told her oxygen levels were at 40% at this point and I knew she was steps away from home. I clicked several screenshots of her to remember the subtle expressions as she drank in that song, and then the time came to hit the button on the screen:

end chat.

Joseph and I sat in silence, his arms wrapped around me, hugging each other on the couch. I could feel his tears running down my arms. I don't know when I've felt such pain as his mother, knowing the depth of his grief. I wished so badly there was some way I could take it from him, but in that moment, my own pain was too great and I couldn't. She was gone.

Good-Bye #4:

Her story would not end with Good-Bye #3. But within a week, I found myself back on the phone with her doctor, about to face Good-Bye #4. I had spent a restless weekend reviewing her Health Care Directive and I was concerned the care she was being given was dangerously close to crossing the line between supportive care to help her beat the virus, and life support to keep her body alive against her wishes. The doctor, too, had wanted to have the same conversation with me. We discussed whether or not she would want to be placed into a nursing home, how she felt about her death, among other things. In the end, I told him I loved her enough to let her go. He was quiet for several moments, and then in a very soft voice he told me how grateful he was to hear me say that, because in that statement, he knew I understood how grave things were with her condition. We agreed one last time we would pull care and we would let her pass.

I was at work that day when that call came in. My co-worker graciously left the office area so I could speak with the doctor in private. This time, I couldn't make it through the call before breaking down. I had been placed once again in the position of holding her life in my hand and it was painful beyond my wildest imagination. By this point, I had been begging God that not only did he need her to be her advocate at the hospital, but He needed to be her advocate with me as well. I am by no means a medical professional. This situation was so far over my pay grade there was no way I could make an informed decision about what needed to be done. God had to speak through me regarding what she needed, and in this moment, I needed Him to be screaming at full volume.

I was crying hard when I hung up with the doctor. I quickly made my way to the restroom, resolved not to emerge until I had composed myself. Once inside, I bawled for an eternity.

Making End of Life Decisions

I take this honor very seriously...

Like I said earlier, with mom's heart condition, it never crossed my mind that I would be asked to make end of life decisions on her behalf. With my father now gone, along with both my siblings, I recognize it falls on my shoulders. I take this honor very seriously and I wouldn't relinquish this responsibility for anything. But there was no way I could've prepared myself for the shot to my heart I felt in the moment when I was asked, not once, but twice, what my wishes were.

When my brother passed in 2007, my parents and I did the tough job of talking about death. We got our affairs in order and we had conversations about the various "what if" scenarios. One of those conversations was in early April in my home at the farm. Mom looked me right in the eye and told me "Look, God won't take me one day before my designated time. And if Coronavirus is the vehicle by which He takes me home, so be it. And if not, this virus won't be able to take me. I do not fear death."

I don't know how I would've made it through the tough conversations with the hospital staff if we had not laid this foundation prior. I'm grateful we had the tough talks. I'm grateful for Christ's death on the cross that made this event a "see you later" instead of a final goodbye. I'm grateful mom had the foresight and the wisdom to give me that gift right before contracting the virus. But even with all of that, holding her earthly life in my hands was definitely up there on the list of "hardest moments". I wouldn't wish those moments on anyone.

Planning the Second Funeral

Exactly how does one do this while under quarantine?

Joseph and I were still under quarantine when mom was placed on Comfort Care and allowed to pass. This was at the time NYC was burying their coronavirus victims in mass, unmarked graves, and I was mortified at the thought of something similar happening to her remains. Exactly how does one get a loved one's body, full of virus, out of a hospital, and into the ground next to my father in the cemetery? Without the benefit of being able to leave home?

We had just been through the funeral process a month earlier when dad passed, so I made the tough call to "Sam" at the funeral home. She was the amazing young woman who handled all of dad's affairs, and I was confident she could help me now with mom's. Together we made arrangements to have mom's body pulled from the hospital and the remains delivered to me. I knew from there I could call the village and arrange for a spot to be prepared where I could bury her in private.

I told Sam I was postponing all other arrangements, such as the service, and even the obituary. I needed time with (now) two open estates to get out of quarantine and meet with my attorney. From there, we made a quick trip into town and began pulling valuables from her home. Strangely enough, this was the part that slayed me the most.

I stood there in her home and it felt like a giant vacuum had replaced the once love-filled home. I looked around at all the furnishings and felt a sense of overwhelm engulf me as I contemplated the logistics of liquidating not just the items in this home, but the farm as well. In the end, I couldn't touch a thing in her home. It was still hers until that moment the final call came from the hospital and I wouldn't take one step forward on any of it until that moment arrived.

The valuables were moved back to the farm house and carefully organized. In a room in the basement. Where I could shut the door and not have to face their reality.

I was numb. I was operating in a sort of triage mode: tend to the worst wounds first; take care of the rest later.

Emotional Swings

I was on the amusement ride from hell....

Many years ago, I got to zipline through the rainforest in Central America. On the last leg, I was propelled down from the deck of the last tree, to a spot safely on the ground. To make sure the journey would be one I would not forget, the guy at the bottom grabbed the line and began whipping it up and down. Which, by the time that translated to where I was at on the line, was a ride of extreme highs and lows, each with a life jarring transition into the next.

This ride was like that. Only worse.

Mom is sleeping through covid without pain? That must be a good thing. UP! What do you mean you are moving her to ICU and putting her on the vent? At 2:30 in the morning?? DOWN. Mom is coming off the vent. That must be a good thing. UP! What do you mean “what are my end of life wishes for her?” DOWN. Mom is dying. DOWN. What do you mean she is raised from the dead? UP UP UP!!! Mom isn’t eating. DOWN. Mom isn’t staying awake. DOWN. Mom is slipping away again. DOWN. We are pulling support one last time. DOWN. What do you mean she is walking? up? What do you mean she swallowed a bite of food? up? What do you mean you want to release her today? with only fours notice to get time off work, get her things, make arrangements at my own home, and get into town? UP/DOWN. What do you mean “oh oops, never mind...?” DOWN. What do you mean you are releasing her this afternoon? up? Is this for real? up? Do I even dare to get my hopes up? up? Seeing her face at the hospital for the first time in nearly six weeks and getting to hug her again? UP UP UP UP!

It seemed at times this journey was marked by so many ups and downs I didn’t have a stomach left. And it was made more difficult by the well-wishers who weren’t in my reality; who didn’t understand that Covid made everything different, that one simply could not tell “she was going to be alright” or that “she is a strong woman, she’ll be fine”... I never got the luxury of that reality. I was on the amusement ride from hell, and the popcorn watchers from below had no idea how to make it stop. How could they? They were trying their best to be kind, to extend love, to be helpful. To be encouraging, to lift my spirits, to improve my situation. Unfortunately, they couldn’t stop the person at the end of the wire yanking it up and down. Nobody could.

It took a deep toll on me. It wore me out in ways I didn’t know I could be. I cried out to God to be my rock. My anchor. A place where I could find calm and peace.

Sleepless Nights

I hated that phone...

It was tough enough finding any sort of rest after receiving mom's Covid diagnosis. But after that 2:30am call telling me they were moving her to ICU/the vent, I found it near impossible to go to bed at night. I was terrified the phone would ring again and there would be even worse news. I would stay up late into the night each night, steeling myself that perhaps if I just didn't "go to bed", the phone would somehow wouldn't ring.

It was scary. I hated that phone. Especially in the night time hours.

Everything Else Blows Up

trouble loves to run in packs...

When bad stuff hits in life, it likes to come as a bundled package. It's not enough to lose a parent, have the entire globe get shut down, surrender another parent into a medical building where you no longer have access, then lose that parent, again, and again...no...

Everything else in our world had to blow up at the same time as well. The details don't really matter so much as the fact the hits just kept coming. Time and time again I would short-circuit in disbelief and wonder how many "back burners" it was going to take to push everything back to so "someday" it could all get fixed again. Hopefully...

The pain of those moments was intense. But so was the grace of those also involved. And the provision that came later to restore what had been lost. I learned trouble loves to run in packs. Eventually they do toddle off. The trick was to keep hold of the anchor during the storm and not let them get the best of us.

Receiving the Miracle

you must have the wrong patient...

"Hello, this is Mandy. I'm calling to update you about your mother."

This is it. She's gone.

"Your mother is in a chair, drinking water and talking with the nurse. Good Bye."

WAIT!!!!!! WHAT????

Mandy, you must have the wrong patient. My mother is on Comfort Care and most likely has passed.

“What? What room is your mother in? Oh wait... what?? Maybe I should have a nurse call you?!”

MANDY. THAT MIGHT BE A GOOD IDEA.

What was to unfold from there is nothing short of a miracle the likes of Lazarus from the New Testament. I would find out later the reason for the rushed FaceTime video on Friday was because the staff had gathered to say goodbye before their shift ended for the week. They were heartbroken as we were. They were in grief they were losing her. They had graciously stayed out of view during our video call so we had no idea they were there. I was told her room had been full with her nurses, while her doctors lined up outside to watch through the window. Many cried along with us as we prayed with her and ushered her towards heaven with her favorite chorus song. They left that day knowing when they returned on Monday, she would be gone.

Imagine the shock of the nurse on duty the next morning when she looked over at her room and saw her, not dead, but very much alive and trying to get out of bed!! They were stunned beyond belief! They raced in and helped her into a chair. They offered her water. They began to ask her questions: “Do you know your name?” *Marian*. “Do you know where you are?” *St E’s*. “Do you know why you are here?” *Covid*. “Do you know what day it is?” *April*.

Her voice was weak from the vent tube, and her mind should have been gone from the lack of oxygen while she waited to pass. To have her there, in a chair, coherently answering their questions was a literal miracle. The nursing staff quickly called me back to fill me in and to put her on the phone so she could tell me she loved me.

I could not believe my ears...

I’d like to tell you I screamed from the mountain tops “SHE’S BACK!!”; that I immediately called everyone and told them “IT’S A MIRACLE!” But I didn’t. I had been through so many highs and lows, ups and downs, that by this point, I couldn’t allow myself to trust it was yet a done deal. As with many things Covid, there was no linear path to the known. Shortly after her miraculous comeback, she began slipping away from us again. She couldn’t stay awake. She wasn’t eating. And soon the time would come yet again to make the difficult decision to let her go.

The day after that final decision, I got a voicemail from her doctor: her feeding tube had “come out” and so he directed the staff not to replace it, per our conversation. And he also reported she had walked a little that day. We both wondered how that had happened.

The next day, he called again. This time he was almost chuckling. Mom was that one in a million patient that seemed to respond counterintuitively to everything they knew about medicine. He said whenever he tried to help her out (medically) she would backslide, and everytime he would

back way-off (pull all care) she would come back. For the first time, she had eaten a bite of hamburger. On her own. Because she was hungry.

And for the first time, I heard optimism in his voice.

It was crazy how fast she recovered after that. And even though she kept getting positive test after positive test, she kept her spirits up and gave herself purpose. She initiated a prayer ministry between her and God and she spent her waking hours fervently praying over all those God brought to her attention. She took the opportunity with the OT and the PT to do the therapy work she would have been doing at her next stop in rehab. She requested her iPad in her room so she could get reconnected with the world. She inspired many. She inspired me.

So why is this part of the story landing under “The Hardest Parts?”

Because later, when she finally did get back home and I would sit across from her at the table, I found the reality of our situation one of The Hardest Parts. How does one reconcile the truth - she should be dead. She should have massive, massive brain injury. She should be so weak she can't walk. She shouldn't be here. How does one reconcile that truth with the truth sitting before me - she's here. She is alive. She is more cognitively alert than I've seen her in many years. She is active. She is outgoing.

How does one put their mental arms around the fact that God has literally, and I mean LITERALLY, raised your loved one from the dead? And not just brought back from the dead, but UPGRADED in the process? That an entire community loved her enough to pray for her and that God brought this miracle to her door step?

What does one do with that? How does one responsibly move forward with such a gift? If winning the lottery takes wisdom, what is required for something at a level such as this?

That was hard. Really hard. To be face-to-face with God in this manner was humbling beyond belief. I still don't fully grasp this one. But I will tell you, this “hardest part” has changed me.

The Best Parts

This story is incomplete without the other side to balance it out: The truth that pain and hardship are wrapped together with blessings and gifts that not only match the pain but often outshine it. Many of these gifts are woven deep into my soul and I lack the words to describe them. But I would be remiss if I didn't share the ones I do have the language for:

During this time of pain, I was able to connect with so many people in our community and was gifted with a few new close friends that were the missing pieces in my life since returning back home. It also deepened existing friendships, both locally and afar. My closest confidants were always there for me-knowing when to give me space, and knowing exactly what to say when I

called and was a hot blubbering mess. I was blessed by mom's friends: Their love and care for her was amazing.

I was also given the gift of the "present". The constant battering of extreme stress impacted my brain in a way that splintered time into 2 hour time blocks. The past was like a DVD movie I could load up and watch at any time - just grab a tub of popcorn, a comfy blanket and enjoy the show. The future? It was gone. Everything in the world was changing so fast, it was impossible to make any plans, so why waste energy? It was futile anyway.

All I had left was "the present". I like that our english language calls it "the present" because it truly is a gift. No matter how bad things got, I always knew that with my 2 hour time windows, the pain would be only for 2 hours and I could survive that. And within that 2 hour slicing of life, I gained an ever greater gift:

Dependence on God in a way I would've never dreamed imaginable.

This was an area I thought I had already experienced a lot of growth. My many trips to Central America had taught me that any thought of being in control was an illusion and only through total surrender to God did the journey make any sense. But this experience took surrender to a whole new level. To surrender mom's care to the hospital staff and be completely removed from it was hard, but also a huge gift. To surrender the responsibility of what input I needed to give the doctors later in her care there, was also a huge gift.

And I still have that gift with me today. Living in the now and surrendering to God has given me the space to enjoy the beauty of the fall and the harvest. To move forward with confidence in terms of my career and my personal growth. My time window has expanded now. It's about a 6-8 hour time block, and I have Google Calendar to handle anything important beyond that. I don't have to worry about "the future", it doesn't exist. I can surrender all the details to God. And I can breathe. These gifts have brought additional gifts of joy; of Calm; of Love; of Patience. And they are amazing. All of them.

God has truly given us a miracle. I've learned the "hardest part" is truly "the best part." The gifts hidden within the pain are beyond description. I can only make the parallel to the death of Jesus on the cross, and the ultimate gifts that were birthed from His ultimate pain.

God, alone, is the reason I made it through this journey. He is the reason I am alive today. And that, my friends, is....

The Best Part.

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be All The Glory

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Were you able to be with your mother at any time during her stay in the hospital?

A: After Good-Bye #2, a nurse offered I could come to the hospital. They would suit me up in full PPE and I would be allowed into her room. I'd like to tell you I raced into town at the first mention of that opportunity, but the truth is I simply didn't have the strength anymore. The goodbyes had been so painful, and I knew she was already gone. I hesitated before sharing my decision with the nurse because I felt a tinge of guilt for abandoning her in that way. The nurse quickly replied how relieved she was to hear my answer. She had been hoping I would say no. She told me the exposure to Covid was so great up there and as a mother herself, she would never want me there as long as I still had a son of my own who needed me here. She was certain that mom would feel the same way if she were able to voice her opinion in the matter. Her answer was pure spun gold. I will never forget her act of generosity in that moment.

Q: Were you able to stay in touch with your mother?

A: I tried to call daily, but mom was not able to stay awake more than a few minutes and the conversation as such was limited. The first I saw her face was when we FaceTime'd to say goodbye. Later in her journey, we were able to get her iPad to her, and the help of the nurses/turned IT experts- we were able to enjoy a few video chats. Mostly, though, it was by phone.

Q: Did you ever figure out where she got the virus from?

A: No. The fact that Joseph and I did not exhibit any symptoms until a few days after learning of her diagnosis seemed to confirm the fact that we got it from her, not that we were the ones who gave it to her. We took the necessary precautions given to us at the time. We were careful. One of the problems with this virus is the unknown. And the identification of where she got it from will always be that as well.

Q: Did you and Joseph get tested?

A: No. At that point, having a diagnosis wouldn't have changed our situation any. We immediately went into a 2 week quarantine. We significantly upped our intake of vitamin supplements and we forced ourselves outside everyday to take walks, soak in the sun's natural vitamin D and fill our lungs with fresh air. Our symptoms ended up being quite mild. Fatigue was the worst. By the end of the two weeks, we had been symptom free for at least a week and by standards at that time, we were clear to resume interactions with others.

Q: Does it feel good to get your story written so it can be shared with others?

A: No, it doesn't. I'm sure the tears it took to tell this story help to clean the wounds. But beyond that, it's my hope the written version can go forth and share our story so I can walk away from it once and for all. I want to embrace the gifts God has given me and I want to never remember the pain ever again.

Special Thanks

To ALL the staff at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Lincoln, NE. Special shout out to the nurse/turned clergy who held her hand and prayed "last rites" over mom, not knowing specifics of her faith or her spiritual background. Special shout-out also to a good friend of ours here in the community that works there in ICU at St E who made a point to stop by and say hi to her. Thanks to the doctors, especially Dr. Gilliam who shared with me in our last conversation how difficult this virus is for them. Thanks to the hospital itself who embraced faith and the power of prayer.

Thank you, Joseph, for being here in Nebraska with us through this journey. Your presence was one of the best gifts God provided me in this experience. You kept me going. You made me laugh. You gave me something to fight for. I love you...

And thank you to all the wonderful people, both here at home and around the country and globe who prayed for my mother. Her presence here is literally a miracle and is most assuredly a result of all your prayers. THANK YOU!!