

Podcast #192: A Tribute to a Special Mom

I frequently use these podcasts to share interesting details from the lives of interesting people with the same intent Plutarch had in mind when he shared his lives---to give you ideas of things with which you may want to adorn your own lives.

I hope you'll indulge me today as I share some details from the life of someone very close to me—my mother. She passed away a week before Thanksgiving at the age of 99 and I really miss her. I shared a tribute to her at her funeral services. And the thought struck me—if I share the tribute with you, her influence can ripple wider—and that's a good thing, don't you think? I see it as another way to honor her memory—she was truly a Mother of Influence.

Tribute to my mother

My mother has always loved funerals. When she was young, she and her sisters would sneak into the local funeral home in Idaho Falls and listen to the funerals. It didn't matter if they knew the deceased or not. But it wasn't a morbid thing. She has always been fascinated by people's life stories and she enjoyed listening to them. But the real reason she did it was because she said, somehow, she felt close to heaven there. And she liked that feeling. She felt bad, though, that the people didn't get to hear all the nice things said about them. I hope she gets to be here today and hear us.

The day after she passed, I was reading a biography and was struck by this Neal Maxwell quote:

"For the world, enduring may be enough. But enduring well, with grace under pressure, is required of us. We all feel the world. There is no safe sanctuary into which an individual can retreat except the sanctuary of the committed life, consciously chosen, in which an individual reaches a supposed breaking point--but does not break!"

When I read that, I thought, THAT is my mother. Grace under pressure. There were many circumstances in her life that would have broken someone else, but she remained firm and full of hope to the very end. And I started reflecting, how did she do that? I don't remember my mother preaching to me—the conduct of her life was her sermon. As I started thinking about those lessons taught by her example, they reminded me of things that I am learning from a teacher who is teaching me to use the harp and music in therapeutic settings. The same elements that can be used through music to bring comfort and peace and even healing are the same elements my mother used to keep her heart from failing. Let me try and explain.

The first thing my harp teacher taught me is that I need to have a storehouse of a wide variety of melodies to draw upon so that I have something to fit every circumstance. Likewise, my mother had a wide variety of interests and activities that brought her great joy. Boredom was not in my mother's vocabulary. She always had a project she looked forward to. She enjoyed shopping for fabrics and sewed beautifully, just like her mother. She was a fantastic cook and was always clipping new recipes to try out. She loved digging in the dirt and grew incredible gardens of flowers, fruits and vegetables. I, unfortunately didn't inherit her green thumb. I remember I killed a Boston fern about a week after I got it, and she nursed it back to health and kept that thing alive for probably 40 years.

She handstitched beautiful quilts and crocheted countless baby blankets that she delighted in giving to

great grandchildren as well as all the new mothers in her ward and even strangers.

She thoroughly enjoyed clipping the day's headlines, interesting tips, poetry, stories, pictures, and funny cartoons and pasting them in dozens of notebooks. She was a scrapbooker of worthy thoughts and ideals.

She loved music, all kinds. Hector has fond memories of laying on the bed next to her on Saturday nights and watching Lawrence Welk with her. She turned to music to calm herself when anxiety would hit in the dark, lonely nights.

She inherited the Johnson humor and wit. She loved her Facebook and would crack us all up with her frequent witty comebacks. She lived in an independent living center a couple of years—and hated it because there were so many old people there. But she loved the newsletter with the senior jokes and she would call and laugh and laugh as she retold them.

It made us sad to watch her lose her sight, her hearing and the use of her hands and to not be able to do those things she loved to do. But one of her gifts was to be able to focus on that which she could do rather on that which she could not. You might say she had multiple melody lines playing throughout her life, and when one ended, she always had another one to turn to.

She had always loved reading and books. But when she couldn't see well enough to read, she started listening to books and she loved listening to BYU devotionals and of course the news. I can tell you that Nancy Pelosi really riled her. Her mind remained sharp and she fed it with worthy thoughts clear to the very end. She could talk to you about anything. Her curiosity never left her. She would often list all the questions she was going to ask when she got to heaven. I bet she is busy getting her answers.

The next thing my harp teacher taught me is that we need to be mindful of the rhythm or beat of the music we use in healing. The rhythm has tremendous ordering properties for our brains. A fast beat energizes us and a slow beat calms us. We can even affect the rate of the heartbeat by the rhythm of the music we use.

Likewise, my mom had a rhythm to her life that gave her a sense of order and control in the midst of things that were out of her control. She was fiercely independent. Growing up, if I crawled into fresh clean sheets, it was Friday night. In later years, if you heard the washing machine start filling up, it was 8:00 on a Thursday morning. If she was getting her hair done, it was 10 am on Friday. If you heard the door to her bedroom open up and her little walker make its way across the kitchen to pick up her yogurt, granola bar, banana and pill, you knew it was 7 am. It didn't matter if she was sick or had been awake all night, at 7 am she made herself get up and get dressed. To the very end. No matter how hard. And some days she said it was very, very hard.

She had a lifetime fear of freeways, but she managed to avoid them her entire life. In later years, she also developed a fear of turning left. But these things didn't stop her—she just planned alternate routes she was comfortable with like getting to where she was going by only making right turns. We teased her that she could get a job as a UPS driver. She reluctantly gave up her driver's license at age 92 as her sight began to fail.

She was also habitually punctual. Well, better than punctual. If you weren't early, you were late. When we planned her surprise party for her 90th birthday, we had to take this into account. The Bishop was

going to ask her to come meet him in his office at noon, but we knew that meant that she would probably get there at 11:30 right when guests were arriving. So I sent a couple of my kids to her house to try and distract her and hold on to her as long as they could. But at 11:40 I got a text: We tried! But the eagle has flown.

But I would say the most important thing she did to bring order and a sense of security into her life was to live the commandments as she understood them with exactness and care. No matter how chaotic and out of control the world was around her, she knew that so long as she was doing that, everything would work out in the end.

The next element of music I learned about was Harmony where two or more notes or two or more voices are brought together. My teacher taught me that Harmony is how the deepest feelings and emotions are stirred. My mother lived in Harmony with heaven's ways that gave her the power and courage to do things she knew she couldn't do on her own. Her faith was the foundation stone of her life.

There is a scene that will remain forever etched on my heart. She needed some outpatient surgery and I flew out to be with her as she needed someone to stay with her for at least 24 hours after the surgery. She was living in the Independent Living center at the time and I made myself a bed on her couch and turned out the light. The door to her bedroom was open slightly and I heard a sound coming from her room. I quietly got up to check on her and could see in the dim glow of her clock that she had crawled out of bed and was on her knees vocally and tearfully pleading, not for herself, but for her children and other loved ones, naming us by name and the specific blessings she was seeking for us. I have a feeling she will continue doing that for us.

My father was also a believer in the power of prayer and Heaven's ways.

A hundred years ago, families were facing similar challenges to ours. Only the plague then was called polio. Someone who remembered those days wrote, "One day you had a headache and an hour later you were paralyzed. How far the virus crept up your spine determined afterward whether you could walk or even breathe. Parents waited fearfully every summer to see if it would strike. One case turned up and then another. The count began to climb. The city closed the swimming pools and we all stayed home, cooped indoors, shunning other children."

My 3-year-old father had just come home from a family outing to Bear Lake when he was struck with the dreaded disease that left him with a lifetime of physical limitations and a misshapen body. Years later, he wrote a book that he called "Handicap: Curse or Blessing" in which he shared a special answered prayer of his. He said that one day he went to a grove of orange and eucalyptus trees near his home in San Bernardino where he knelt to plead for two specific blessings. One, he wanted very much to serve a mission and he had already been turned down. And two, he desired to one day be married and raise a family, but he said, "Who would ever marry the likes of me?"

He left the grove feeling the assurance his prayers had been heard and would be answered.

He was called to the New England States mission not long after that. As he was nearing the end of his service, his father was called to preside over the Swedish mission and he was given a call to serve a second mission there.

It was while he was serving in the mission home in Sweden that he got to know a pretty sister missionary, Sister Johnson, from Idaho Falls, the first sister missionary called to Europe after World War 2. She had the uncommon ability to look past the outward appearance to the inward condition of the heart. And she began to notice his goodness—how kind, thoughtful, patient and grateful he was; she could feel the depth of his spirit. I only recently found out that my dad went to his father and asked to be transferred out to the field because he was afraid he was falling in love with her. His father, who had his priorities straight, kept him in the mission home where their love and friendship deepened, and they were married not long after they got home.

My mother was actually promised to someone else back home, but she said that she had a sacred experience that she has never shared with anyone that told her my dad was the man she was to marry. Surely it was a direct answer to his prayers and by living in Harmony with heaven's ways, both of their lives were greatly blessed.

When I was clearing out my mother's house a couple of years ago, Shannon called and said she remembered when she was a little girl, her grandfather told her there was a rose that was pressed in a large volume of San Bernardino history. I found it—it had been there for nearly 100 years. He told her that he made three great catches in his life—the first one was this rose. He was a little boy sitting on his father's shoulders when President Coolidge and his wife drove by in a parade. Mrs. Coolidge threw out a red rose, and he caught it. The second catch was when he was way out in the outfield and caught a fly ball—the only one he ever caught. But his greatest catch was the day he caught my mom. And what a wonderful life they had together, including travels to many places around the world.

In his last years, he was mostly confined to bed and my mother patiently and tenderly cared for his needs. When I would visit him, he would lay back on his pillow and smile: "Don't you have the most wonderful mother in the entire world? I am so grateful for her."

He knew exactly what he wanted to buy her for her last Christmas present from him just a couple of weeks before he passed nearly twenty years ago---it was a new Temple dress and she made sure in recent days that I knew where to find the dress and that that was the dress she wanted to be buried in. And although we didn't plan it this way, today is his birthday. I'm sure he considers having my mother back with him his best birthday present ever.

Which brings me to the final element—healing music has to go home. There must be a note or a chord at the end of the music that feels satisfying and complete. When Krystal was home, sometimes when she played the piano, she'd leave off the last note or chord because she knew that wherever I was in the house, I would come and find that last note because I couldn't bear to leave it dangling out there.

Home was the center of my mother's earthly life and her heavenly home her destination. But she prayed that she could do it on her terms. And her prayers were answered.

When my otherwise healthy mom was diagnosed with an aggressive leukemia a few weeks ago, she insisted that life go on as usual. Laundry was on Thursday, hair on Friday, 7 am was time to get up clear until her last day. She didn't want anyone to fuss over her. She had three specific requests in her prayers—that she could just peacefully fall asleep one day without having to suffer too much pain; that she could pass away in her own bed and that she would never have an attendant have to dress and bathe and feed her.

On Tuesday, the hospice nurse took her vitals and said they were looking good. I called her Wednesday evening and told her I would be there on Friday. Thursday morning, the nurse came again to check on her and said she had weakened drastically. So she ordered a hospital bed and oxygen and arranged for a care giver to start coming to help my mom. She tucked her in and made her comfortable and she and my brother left the room. Steven went to check on her less than an hour later, and she was gone.

She did not want that hospital bed and I would say her prayers were answered. Again. She is one you want to have praying for you.

Steven asked me to help clear out her room when I got there and I brought some boxes back to the hotel room to sort. I was sitting on the bed, missing her so much. It really hurt to not have that last hug and that last goodbye. "Oh, mama, why couldn't you wait just one more day?" My dad did that to me too! I'm going to have words with both of them when I see them again. My husband said maybe it was one last effort to teach me that if I'm not early, I'm late, because I am notoriously late. But as I was sitting there, the impression came, there is a notebook in the box over there. Go look through it.

I found it. It was labeled Margit's Special Treasures. As I flipped through it, I was drawn to this poem, and I could hear her voice as I read it:

May I go now?
Don't you think the time is right?
May I say good-bye to pain-filled days
And endless lonely nights?
I've lived my life and done my best,
An example tried to be,
So can I take that step beyond
And set my spirit free?

I didn't want to go at first.
I fought with all my might!
But something seems to draw me now
To a warm and loving light.

I want to go! I really do!
It's difficult to stay.
But I will try as best I can
To live just one more day...
To give you time to care for me
And share your love and fears.
I know you're sad and are afraid
Because I see your tears.

I'll not be far, I promise that,
And hope you'll always know
That my spirit will be close to you
Wherever you may go.

Thank you so for loving me.
You know I loved you too
That's why it's hard to say good-bye
And end this life with you.
So hold me now, just one more time,
And let me hear you say,
Because you care so much for me,
You'll let me go today.

I was going to say and now my mother's song is ended. But it hasn't ended—it has only begun with endless verses still ahead. And today I give gratitude to Him who has overcome death and made it possible for us to one day be reunited, never to be separated again.

Oh, what songs of the heart
We shall sing all the day,
When again we assemble at home,
When we meet ne'er to part
With the blest o'er the way,
There no more from our loved ones to roam!

We will miss her physical presence, but we know she loves us and she knows we love her. And that will carry us through until we meet again.