



Perspective

A Thanksgiving Reflection

by Karen Marcdante, MD

"At times, our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us."

-Albert Schweitzer

These days, it seems that there are lots of light to be rekindled. Who knew that our lives would change so much due to a microscopic organism? I don't know about you, but I have recognized that I am grieving the loss of our former lives. It is the little things. I miss the drive to and from work, when I had a chance to plan and reflect on my day. I really, really miss, terribly, those moments in the hallways when I passed colleagues. Whether it was a smile and a quick hello or stopping the other person for a quick chat or some problem solving, those moments of connection were there – but now no longer occur without planning. Acknowledging that I am, in fact, grieving is a good first step. And recognizing that it was grief resulted in returning to a time when I grieved the most.

I was seventeen when, early one morning, the phone rang. My dad answered, then hit a wall with his fist. My mom had just died after a short battle with an unknown cancer. The lights went out for my dad, my sisters, and me. Fortunately, we had many who helped us to rekindle that light. I have realized that my mom, even in her absence, was also involved in relighting and maintaining that light. As we work to have character development become an explicit part of our curriculum, I realize just how important role models who demonstrated their character strengths daily (such as my mom) can be.

My mom was an amazing woman. She went to Marquette School of Nursing at a time when women most often stayed home. She gave birth to and raised my five sisters and me, working full time to make ends meet. As a nurse, she worked third shift until we were all in school for a full day. Then, she went back to school, gaining the credentials she needed to become a public health nurse. She had a quiet, strong faith, a tomboy's love of sports, and a wicked sense of humor. It is with deep gratitude that I think about all I did learn from her: that kindness is the key to building relationships; that following your heart brings you success, even through the many challenges; that persistence augments any of your natural abilities and can help you as you strive for excellence; that humor (or the well-aimed glass of water during a spontaneous water fight at the dinner table) brings people together with zest and joy. While I may not have recognized it when I was younger, I also recognize that she had amazing patience, hope and a spirituality that rose above the differences in religions in which my parents were raised. She encouraged us all to be curious and to be strong, independent women. When she faced her death at a very early age, she chose to exhibit bravery, grace and gratitude.

Since those days, I have been blessed to have many other strong role models in my life, each exhibiting character strengths that have helped them make the world a better place. I am grateful for each and every one of them. Mentors and colleagues alike have provided kindness, love, and let's face it, the prudence I needed as I faced challenges. The many learners with whom I have been honored to work often infuse my life with their bravery (it's hard to be a medical student!), zest, curiosity and perspectives. They remind me every day that life is full of opportunities if you look for them.

And in this day, when I grieve about the differences in my daily activities, I am grateful that these people are still here, persevering under conditions that are new to us all. There is so much to be grateful for – and this Thanksgiving I will pray that they all stay happy and healthy and are blessed with others who offer a helping hand, an open mind and a kind word. Our world is certainly challenging the lights in our life but, gratefully, our world is also full of people who can rekindle them. Be safe!

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