

Lessons

Hi everyone – thank you, all, for being here to celebrate Orvina’s life.

I’m Trevor. I’m Orvina and Ray’s youngest boy, and fourth in our family of five kids. Unofficially, Mom called me the “happy accident” - she was 45 when I was born, so you get it...

An advance warning: Our family tends to be somewhat irreverent. I may say some things that cause nervous laughter or some squirming in the seats; it’s ok – you’re not alone!

We already know about Mom’s love of horses, music, and teaching; her voluntarism and commitment to her community and have been recognized. She also talked or wrote extensively about growing up during the Great Depression and her teenage adventures smuggling cattle across the U.S. border.

So, to honour my mother, I’m going to talk about a few of the lessons she taught me through the years – lessons I learned through our shared experiences, and lessons I learned in our extensive discussions. And believe me, when I say ‘extensive,’ I am not embellishing.

Character - Swamp grass

I told this story at her 80th, but I’ll tell it, again.

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Mom had two thumbs: neither of them were green. Aunt Toni, who did have a green thumb, would bring mom a plant, and then it would die. Finally, Aunt Toni brings a plant that she claimed even Mom couldn't kill: it was called a swamp grass. And she was right! That swamp grass thrived in the living room's big bay window – it grew like a weed. It was at least 5 feet tall, and very bushy at the top.

One evening when I was about 14, Mom and I were coming home from a milk run to Thomas's dairy when we noticed a bunch of vehicles at our place. "Hey, we have company!" I said, but as we got closer, we saw the company was the RCMP – there were eight or 10 cars in the front and back yard of our house.

Mom parks her little brown Rabbit, and I had to run to catch up to her as she hustled toward the group of police in front of our house. "What's going on here?" Mom said.

The officer in front says, "Who're you?"

And my 5'4" mom, who maybe weighed 130 lbs at the time, says, "NO, WHO ARE YOU?"

The guy actually stepped back; and then said, "Oh, you must be Mrs. Black."

And my mother says, "Correct. And I still don't know who you are."

- At this point I'm thinking to myself that I'd always thought my problem with authority had come from my Dad, but I was now reconsidering.

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The cop says, "I'm Sgt. So-and-so, and we just finished talking to your husband."

"How'd that go?" Mom said.

"About as well as this. We had a warrant because we thought that big plant was marijuana. We were just leaving," he said.

Then mom said, "And you brought all these people to arrest little old me?"

"Well, it'll make for a good story," he said. He definitely looked like he wished he was somewhere else.

"You're darn right," Mom said.

We were met in the house by a very unhappy Ray Black. While we were gone, Dad thought it would be a good time to take a bath. Just as he'd settled into his bath, the police knocked on the door. Our doors were never locked, so Dad yells, "Come in." They couldn't come in without serving the warrant, so they kept knocking and Dad kept yelling, "COME IN." Finally, wrapped in a towel – and cursing all the way, I'm certain – Dad answers the door and gets served with a search warrant. What made him even more angry was, after all the trouble of getting out of the bath, there wasn't any search – the cop didn't even step into the house. He just poked his head in, looked right, saw the swamp grass, and said, "Oh."

My lesson that day was that no matter who you are, no matter what your position is, you have to know your place. Mom had a right to know who was at her home, and the officer should have

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identified himself, immediately – especially when she asked him. He didn't, so Mom put him in his place.

Relationships – Ocean waves

As I mentioned, Mom and I had deep, far-ranging discussions. It was after Dad died, while she was still in her house, and we were talking about relationships. Once she'd clearly established her wish for me to find someone, we talked a bit about her marriage.

She was philosophical in her later years, and I'll never forget her insight: She said that Ray Black – and she said his full name – wasn't the easiest man to be married to, but she always knew he loved her, and that he loved her a lot.

Then she made a motion with her hand like a wave, and while making the motion, she said there are ups and downs in our relationships. These ups and downs can last days, weeks, or even months. She said that when you're in the downs, you have to remember the ups. And when you're in the ups, to enjoy and cherish them because they, too, will end. And then, in her characteristically pragmatic way, she said none of this counts if you're married to a jerk.

So now if I'm having a tough moment in a romantic relationship I see her hand, moving like a wave, though the ups and downs.

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Aging – Look in the mirror

Maybe about a year later, we're sitting at the table, again. I was sporting a new look, and whining about my thinning hair. She just gave me that look, and I think you all know the look I'm talking about. She said, "Trevor, who do you think I see when I look in the mirror? I don't see this old lady with a wrinkled face and failing eyes and a sore hip – I see the 16-year-old girl who rides her pony like the wind over the hills and through the coulees of the lake pasture. Our bodies age, but it's our mind that matters. As long as you think young, you are young."

Aside from the obvious lesson, from that day on, when I look at people, I try to see what they see when they look in the mirror – the youth inside.

Faith – We are all God's children

Mom's faith was unshakeable. Despite our family's tragedies – I can't comprehend what it's like for a mother to lose two children – Mom never questioned God or her faith. I have never felt faith, so that part of her was always a mystery to me. But I admired her because Mom was a true Christian – she extended her kindness, generosity, and love to whoever needed it. So I wasn't surprised when she told me how shocked, angry, and disappointed she was with person who will remain anonymous. She'd been out somewhere with this person, playing piano, and he was giving her a ride home when he began disparaging gay people and saying they

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can never be redeemed. She told me she got angrier and angrier, and when they pulled into her driveway, she turned to him and said, “We are ALL God’s children. Shame on you, you should know better. Your job is to teach forgiveness. Leave the judging to God.” And she got out and went into the house.

I learned that if my mother won’t remain silent, even when it’s more comfortable to do so, then I’m failing her, and myself, if I remain silent.

Grace

My final, and maybe most important lesson, was a lesson in grace. Her last day with us, she couldn’t talk. She could grunt yes or no, and she would express humour with a smile and a kind of breathless laugh. Mostly, she didn’t respond at all, but she was listening and would open her eyes if something was said or asked of her that she deemed was worth her effort – I called it playing possum.

A few hours before she caught her stars, I was sitting on her bed, stroking her forehead – it settled her and I liked it. She opened her eyes, and she looked at me. And I mean really looked – it was like she was seeing inside me. I sensed the struggle and the immense will she summoned to say what she said next, “LOVE – LOVE – LOVE.”

I said, “You’re saying love, Mom. Are you saying you love me?”

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Now I'm going to get ahead of this story because I know my brother, Wayne, is going to gleefully tell it to anyone who'll listen for the rest of his days:

I've just asked my mother if she loves me, literally on her deathbed, so imagine my shock, my surprise, indeed my consternation, when, keeping her eyes locked on mine, she smiles and starts that breathless laughing.

Over to my right, it sounds like my loving brother is going to fall out of his chair, he is giggling so hard. I chose to ignore him. I'll be honest: I was a little hurt. But I recovered and said, "Well, I love you, Mom" and kissed her smiling face.

Then I got serious and said, "Are you saying you're feeling love, Mom?" Her smile left, and she shook her head, no. Mom was very particular in her language, so I thought a second, and then rephrased: "Are you saying you're feeling LOVED, Mom?"

She solemnly nodded, yes, and there was a look of relief at being understood as she closed her eyes and her head sank further into the pillow. A few minutes later, she was lightly snoring.

We were always happy when she slept because it meant she was comfortable. About an hour later Wayne and I left for supper, and shortly after that I got the call that Mom was gone:

Orvina Black died with grace.

Thank you for your lessons, Mom. I love you.