



By Caryn Sullivan

## **GRATEFUL FOR MOM'S MOST VALUABLE LESSON: LIFE ISN'T FAIR**

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I won't be taking my mom to brunch or sending her flowers on this Mother's Day, for I lost her years before I became a mother myself. In years past I've been melancholic on this day, as I've brooded over how much I've needed her in my life, feeling cheated by the little time I had with her before she succumbed to cancer. But this year, having just marked five years without cancer in my own body, I've been thinking about how well she prepared me for life and how grateful I am for the most valuable lesson she taught me.

My childhood was rockier than many, my parents' divorces and deaths landing at my feet with a resounding thud that left a lasting impact on my psyche. To her last breath, my mother was unwavering in her oft-stated conviction that "life isn't fair." With these words of wisdom in my pocket, I was able to move beyond the tough stuff of my youth without becoming paralyzed or feeling victimized.

As an adult, I've thought she must have been clairvoyant, as I've had to pull her wise words out of my pocket on regular intervals. They've helped me to focus my energy on activism, not anger, since my firstborn was diagnosed with autism. They steadied me when my marathoner husband had a heart attack. They stopped me from feeling sorry for myself when I learned I had breast cancer and gave me the resolve to say defiantly, "I'm not going to die from this." Above all, the words protected me from the bitterness that camped on my doorstep when our daughter became seriously ill.

More than once friends have asked whether I feel I've been given more than my fair share to deal with. I've honestly said no, for how could I view it that way with my mother's words so firmly ensconced in my soul? That's not to say it's been easy. There have been moments when I've been exhausted and overwhelmed, incredulous that my life is what it is. At times I've fought off intense feelings of envy as I've looked around me and noted how others' lives seem to go more smoothly. Yet, over time, I've made my peace, realizing that while I can't control autism or illness, I can control my attitude and my behavior. I see that everyone has their struggles, some more transparent than others.

Today, I'm mindful of how my challenges have enriched my life in unexpected ways. I always planned to have a career, like my mother. But with an autism diagnosis in hand and another baby on the way, I abruptly changed hats and became the stay-at-home mom I was raised not to be. Ironically, by giving much to my children that I didn't get from my own mom, I've been able to heal my wounds a bit.

This is my 19th Mother's Day since I became first a stepmother, then a mother. My crew, the two I gave birth to and the two who came as a package deal with their wonderful father, has had lots of ups and downs as a blended family with a special-needs child. They've quietly and courageously faced challenges, big and small. Living with them has made me a more compassionate, patient and hopeful person.

They've helped me to see that success comes in more forms than advanced degrees and financial wealth. They've given me many reasons to be proud, whether by getting through school and finding a good job with benefits, facing daunting medical, social or scholastic hurdles, or holding out for the right person to share life with. I hope that when they become parents they will experience the joy and pride that they've given me.

So on this Mother's Day, I honor both my mother and my children. I hope that as my guys traverse life, they will embrace my mantra that while life may not be fair, it is rich and wonderful. I hope that when life tosses them lemons, they will grab a pitcher, some sugar and some friends and make lemonade. Humbly, I hope that someday they will look back and be as grateful for my words as I am for my mother's.

Caryn Sullivan is a Minnesota attorney and writer. Her column appears from time to time on these pages. Her essay, "Dancing with Despair," is featured in "Special Gifts: Women Writers on the Heartache, the Happiness, and the Hope of Raising a Special Needs Child" (Wyatt-Mackenzie, July 2007). Her e-mail address is [carynsullivan@comcast.net](mailto:carynsullivan@comcast.net).