

CHAPTER 20

“GRACEING AGEFULLY”

FEED THE “GOOD WOLF” IN THE SECOND HALF

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At age 61, I had an epiphany. *I'm only halfway through this life.* It made sense to imagine that I might outlive my parents by 30 years; after all, they both had. We know that the average life expectancy has steadily increased since such things were recorded. Now, the average life expectancy is almost 80 years; when my parents were in their prime, it was about 69 years.

I am the youngest of five, born in 1954 when my parents were on the cusp of 40 years old (ancient at that time for childbearing). When I was about ten, I recall asking my father, “When are you going to die?” He answered with certainty, “When I’m 60.” My world closed in (picture a dolly zoom in a film). I’m feeling my ten-year-old self in a 20-year-old meat suit, no more mature or independent than I am at that moment. I’ve lost my parents, my rocks, my world. That moment shaped my thoughts and fears from that day forward.

My father and mother lived to 94 (almost 95) and 99 (almost 100), respectively. I had a great-grandmother who lived to 106. My parents outlived their parents by more than 30 years, and they outpaced the average life expectancies at the time by a long shot. Thus, at 61, with modern medicine, I concluded that 120 was a reasonable expectation for me. It changed the way I approached the next phase (heretofore the second half) of my life.

I asked myself *what could I possibly accomplish if I knew I had another 60-plus years?* I had asked and knew the answer from older friends and family was typically, “I don’t want to live that long,” or “Once you hit 65 or 70 it’s all downhill,” or “I won’t be able to afford to live in a retirement community or to afford the care I will probably need,” or “Medicare and Social Security will probably dry up by then,” or back to “I’d rather die than be a vegetable and burden to my family.” *Hmmm*, I thought to myself, *I have learned that what we think will come to be; what if I change my thoughts and see the future as a very long horizon as it was when I was much younger? If I were 30 again, I wouldn’t imagine my demise; I would be dreaming about unlimited possibilities. If I had another 60-plus years, I could create anything, make money, live freely, and live a life not bound by the laws I had come to believe immutable.*

GRACE

My mother’s name was Grace. When we were kids, she would scoff, “My mother named me Grace, but I’m not graceful!” We grew up believing she had been poorly named.

By the time I reached puberty, I was an only child. My siblings had all left the nest, and I was the only one still home. Grace was in menopause, and we were living in kind of a perfect storm of hormones racing vs. receding, not pretty. There was a lot of tension. I often felt unheard. I found friends and friends’ parents who would listen, share and laugh so I could feel my feelings and not be ashamed or guilty. I was lucky in that way. On the other hand, Grace was going through life changes; my father was away a lot or spending time with his friends and with pastimes that she didn’t share, like sailing.

My father was a commercial airline pilot. He loved his work. I grew up in a household where you could make a very good living doing something you loved. It was also a job that forced retirement at age 60. His identity was attached to being a pilot. He began finding other activities that occupied his time.

At 55, he bought his first sailboat. We grew up as a family with powerboats. We spent weekends and vacations on the water, water skiing, swimming, fishing, and sometimes camping as a family was the model in which Grace had formed her ideal vision of family life. My father and I

spent more time together as his time off increased, he taught me to sail, and we bonded in the embrace of his sailing buddies, racing and overnights and two-week excursions to points along the Connecticut coast with his club. We both loved it.

Back home, Grace was suffering. Her memories of happy family life faded, and her dream of retirement together with my father, where they would travel and share experiences, had faded too. At a time when she hoped she would be free from the anxieties of caring for five children, virtually alone, as my father's work took him away from home for days at a time, she felt abandoned and resentful. This did not play well with my father or with me and further distanced me from her. She began drinking. She wasn't a heavy drinker growing up. I have no memory of her drinking before that. However, as she entered this part of her life, I now see that she couldn't bear to feel her disappointment and loss of hope. She would declare that she loved to spend time with her children and grandchildren, yet when they would visit, or she would visit them, she couldn't bear their misbehaving or the clatter that accompanies several young children in the same house. She would declare that she loved when they were infants. Then they would grow up, which seemed to be unfortunate for her. She volunteered to help the homeless. She volunteered to care for infants. These things brought her some satisfaction and joy, but not enough to fill the void she hoped would be filled by my father after he retired. She hoped this would be her payback time for all the time she toughed it out by herself with all of us while he was away. Drinking numbed the pain she couldn't bear to face.

I recall having conversations with her about leaving my father at that time. She would lament that she wasn't able to earn a living, but she almost couldn't bear living the empty and sad days as my father reaped the fruits of his retirement and went off to sea to frolic with friends while she remained back and refused to participate in his new passion. It seems that she began to show signs of dementia as far back as this time, in her mid-to-late fifties. The drinking did not help. She was not a blackout alcoholic. She never admitted to being an alcoholic. She never sought treatment, and frankly, she didn't hit bottom. The bottom came up to meet her.

Over the next 30 years, my parents moved, spent more time together, and my father retired his sailboat when they moved further north and inland to New Hampshire. My mother continued drinking, often lapsing

into snarky, anger-filled passive-aggressive barbs at my father or to any of us who were present. Clearly, the void filled up with that roiling mess of resentment, anger, fear, and hopelessness more deeply each day. There was no drain. The void was filling, brimming, growing, and becoming darker. Soon, the light would be snuffed out along with all her retirement fantasies and dreams.

The darkness took over in the form of dementia. She was diagnosed in her early 90s when they had moved to a retirement community with the potential for continuing care. My father had become her caretaker while his sight had diminished to near blindness with macular degeneration. He would not give up the fight to be the sole provider and caretaker easily despite his efforts failing to keep up with her increasing incapacity and demands. As a family, we intervened and had her assessed. It was determined that she needed to be in memory care. My father had a much harder time dealing with this change and the guilt he associated with it. My mother moved into the memory care unit and never looked back.

They said she acclimated faster than any resident before. In the end, she survived and thrived in memory care longer and more joyfully than any of her fellow residents. She was dubbed “Amazing Grace” and “Princess Grace,” as her name card showed at the table where she had her meals with the other residents. Many of the nurses and caretakers would tell us that they would sometimes get depressed by the environment, but that a visit to Grace’s room to sit with her or hold her hand and listen to her hilarious tales would always lift their spirits and send them out with renewed joy to finish their rounds.

Grace lived a vibrant fantasy life with dementia. She was a fan of Tom Selleck, who was one of the younger “hot actors” of the time. She had a magazine cover picture of him in her scrapbook. She soon let my father know on his daily visits to her room, she was married to Tom. She didn’t seem to think it would be upsetting to him. Her fantasy was so vivid and consistent that sometimes the nurses would pull one of us aside and ask, “Does she really know Tom Selleck?” We would play along with her fantasy and ask things like, “Tom is married; what does his wife think about you two?” She would reply matter of factly, “We have an understanding.” Okay.

Grace was an avid baseball fan growing up, much to the chagrin of my father, who had no passion for team sports like most dads. Also, to me,

the cries that would erupt from the darkened tv room on summer nights would annoy me endlessly as she watched her beloved NY Mets win or lose. Her love for baseball began with the Brooklyn Dodgers, and when they left town, she married the Mets. I didn't get it. Her love for baseball never faded, and after a time in memory care, her true love was transferred to Babe Ruth. Babe was everything. He made her clothing and jewelry; he took care of all the little children, and, of course, he showered her with gifts, his time, and requited love. She had other more fleeting "flings" with Elvis and Tiger Woods. My sister once asked her, when she said she was dating Tiger Woods, "What about Babe?" to which she replied, "Don't you think he's a little old for me?" She was 95.

When I would regale my older friends with stories of Grace they would roar with laughter and then say, "If that happens to me, just shoot me." I was confused. My mother was happier and freer than I ever remembered. She appreciated where she was, the people who cared for her. Her meals were prepared for her; she never had to do dishes or make the bed or clean. They played games. Trivia, for example, was one of her favorites and she did very well compared to the other participants. They watched old movies, her other passion, they took her to plays and on a bus to see things. I kept thinking *it's really those around you that suffer more than you. They see themselves being a burden and behaving in a way that would shame them. They didn't realize that she was in her happiest place ever.* That was when we started to say, "I want to go where she is," and we named it "Graceland."

In retrospect, I believe dementia in my mother's case was grace, with a small g. I realized that she manifested her dementia by numbing the pain and never feeling her true feelings. She never faced the darkness that befell her and brought it into the light to be dispersed. At the same time, she manifested her fantasy life. It worked for her.

This story is a lesson about aging, living well, and being healthy until we die. It's about healing our wounds in this lifetime. This means understanding ourselves, self-awareness. It means shining a light on the dark recesses, coaxing them out of the darkness, loving them, and through that comes healing.

My mother's life taught me that there is a big difference between striving for the life you believe is your dream and living a life today that exceeds your wildest dreams. My mother was always striving, working toward, and

waiting for her dream life. It only came when she was “out of her mind” in dementia. I’m certain it wouldn’t have been the life she imagined when she was younger. It may seem sad to most, but at the same time, she was gifted with grace in her last years. She was well cared for, safe, free of worry, free of disease, and surrounded by love.

Ironically, my father provided everything she needed for her care and dedicated himself to visiting her every day until he died. He always said, “I just want to live one more day than your mother.” He preceded her in death by three years, and she was able to stay safe and cared for until she died.

In fact, in the end, I healed my relationship with my mother through her journey of dementia. Observing her operating free of the bonds of anxiety and concern for what others thought, I met a funny, joyful, charming, loving woman with strength and tenacity beyond anything I had recognized before her dementia. I learned more about living well from my mother during that time than all the years before. I witnessed her grace in dying. She was ready, at peace, and eager to reunite with her loved ones who had passed before. I learned she had, indeed, been well-named, Grace.

THE TOOL

THE PRACTICE: FEEDING THE GOOD WOLF

There is a myth about a grandfather who tells his grandson that we each have a battle going on inside us between two wolves, a good wolf and a bad wolf. The bad wolf represents fear, evil, anger, envy, jealousy, doubt, sorrow, regret, guilt, resentment, inferiority, false pride, superiority, and ego. The good wolf represents joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, kindness, humility, benevolence, empathy, generosity, forgiveness, truth, compassion, and faith. The grandson thinks for a moment and asks, “Which one wins?” The grandfather thoughtfully replies, “The one you feed.”

- Start each day with time alone, in silence. If this is impossible, get up an hour earlier than usual. Make it a daily non-negotiable.
- Be attentive to the voices in your head. Develop an awareness of what they are saying. In my case, I wake up with the bad wolf in my head before I’m fully awake. I use a tool that Julia Cameron wrote about in

The Artist’s Way. She calls it “morning pages.” I have modified it for my use and call it “flushing the toilet.” I transfer to the paper whatever I can translate to words from the racing thoughts and feelings. It doesn’t always make sense, it’s not good prose, and I usually can’t keep up with the pace of the thoughts. Eventually, the process of putting pen to paper to empty the mind of the bad wolf voices will capture and flush them out. Relax and enjoy the space you’ve created.

- Meditate or pray. I wrote a prayer that I read. I have copied it here. You can use it, modify it or write your own.
- *Thank you, God. I am awake; I am breathing; I am well. (Insert the name of loved one(s)) is alive, he is breathing, he is well. Thank you for filling my life with the fuel that keeps everything running. Thank you for the people around me—my family, friends, clients, neighbors, patients, colleagues, healthcare people—all the people around who make my life run smoothly, especially those I don’t see or realize what they are doing for me. Thank you for putting them there. Thank you for my body. Help me to love and appreciate it, even loving the things I fear, that irritate me, or that I don’t like. Help me to love and appreciate everything where it is. Help me to love over fear today, especially to love me. Help those I touch to love themselves. Thank you for the grace to take the fearless path. Work through me to love and help all that I touch and that touch me.*
- Begin to curate the good wolf voice in your head. Over time it will become a habit. With a clear and grateful mind, ask, “What if?” I find it easy to ask, “What if?” and fill in the worst-case scenario. Now, I ask “what if?” and fill in the best-case scenario. I set my intention. I feel how the best case feels. I start my day with that intention.



Jennifer Sproul is a realtor in the Washington DC metropolitan area. She began a new career in real estate at age 50 and intends to continue well into her 90s or more. As a member of the “Positive Aging” movement, she applies the lessons learned from her aging parents to her life and in her work. Jennifer considers the second half the most exciting time of her life and sees unlimited opportunities ahead.

“My healing journey began long ago. It has crystallized during the second half of my life through experiences and wisdom gained earlier. I maintain a view of the horizon ahead of me as far as I’ve already come (I’m always halfway). I am an evangelist for living your best life now. I learned from Grace that we manifest what we think. I learned from Grace that by getting “out of your mind” you find serenity. I learned from Grace that you always have things to be grateful for no matter what’s happening around you. I learned from experience the challenges make the journey worthwhile. I learned from experience no matter how bad what is happening may seem, there is something glorious on the other side.”

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