

CARRIE TRIFFET, LOS ANGELES
Changing My Perceptions

My father died recently, following a long illness. But first, let me tell you a little about my family.

I never got along with my sister. Sharon was an only child until I came along, and she made me pay for ruining that good thing she had. As a kid, I had monsters, and she loved to terrify me with them. I hated her for it.

As a teen, Sharon embraced a strict sect of orthodox Judaism. We were brought up “suburban orthodox”: We kept kosher at home, but ate in restaurants when no one was looking. Suddenly, Sharon was too kosher to eat off our plates or even sleep in our house.

She and her religious friends would try to coerce me into joining their sect, too, but there was no way. I hated how they would look me up and down, disapproving of the pants I wore, the fast food I ate, the school I attended.

When Sharon was married in an arranged match that seemed straight out of “Fiddler on the Roof,” I was relieved to see her go.

I neither liked nor respected my father. He seemed to me to be both an ineffectual Walter Mitty and an arrogant patriarch, demanding parental respect. This being the “I am woman, hear me roar” ’70s, I fought him tooth and nail.

In 1974, after my mother’s death, my father’s life seemed over as well. He gathered his memories and waited to die. My grandmother moved in to take care of him.

At 18, I split for California and never looked back. Soon after, Dad remarried. Audrey appeared to me a nasty sort: cruel, petty and not too bright. But she seemed good for Dad, so I tried to keep the peace. It didn’t work. I went for years without contacting them at all.

In 1981, Dad had open-heart surgery. Combined with his acute diabetes, it made him quite frail. Audrey watched him like a hawk, monitoring his medicines and food. It was a love-hate relationship. She single-handedly kept him alive all these years, but at a huge cost.

When I received the Gohonzon in 1986, I immediately worked to repair my relationship with Dad and Audrey. Slowly I learned to accept and appreciate them for who they are, rather than be bitterly disappointed by who they’re not. We built a relationship, and I called and visited fairly often. Dad was glad I was back in his life, but he wished I was closer to my sister. I let him know it wasn’t gonna happen.

Now, fast forward to a couple months ago: Dad fell one night and broke four ribs. His blood sugar went haywire, his already weak heart rebelled, and his lungs filled up with fluid. Audrey was terrified. She couldn’t sleep nights for fear he’d die while she wasn’t looking. She screamed at my sister. She screamed at the doctors, and of course, she screamed at Dad. The situation was grim. I realized I’d better fly to Pittsburgh, pronto. On Friday, I booked an emergency flight for Sunday.

I couldn’t fly Saturday, because I was scheduled for an endometrial biopsy. The biopsy hurt like hell. But I figured traveling the next day wouldn’t be so bad; maybe some cramps and bleeding. Well, there were both, as well as severe nausea. I couldn’t eat anything for days.

I felt hopeless and overwhelmed about this visit. What could I accomplish in four days? I’d had no time to chant about it, and I felt unprepared. I arrived in Pittsburgh Sunday evening in a freak snowstorm, and went straight to the hospital. Dad was tiny, shriveled, in his hospital bed. He didn’t recognize me.

I sat passively in his room that evening, and the next day as well. Sharon sent over

homemade meals for Audrey and me, but I was too queasy to eat. I just sat bedside my father, polite strangers, for hours on end. When he needed private things attended to, I obediently left the room.

At home, doing gongyo at 11:00 p.m., confronted by the painful reality of illness and death, I felt paralyzed and overwhelmed by my own selfishness and immaturity. But a small, calm voice in my head reminded me this was no time to wallow in my own failings as a human being. Somehow I had to rise above my weaknesses, summon my highest self, and provide peace, comfort and strength to those around me.

The next morning, I awoke to Audrey bursting into my room in a white-hot rage. She was furious with my sister for not properly feeding me. She ranted that I couldn't eat that crummy hospital food, and selfish Sharon wasn't bringing me the right kinds of homemade foods. She insisted that I go to Sharon's house for dinner that night, where I could be properly fed. I listened quietly. The calm voice in my head came to me again. I told her it was clear she's not really angry at Sharon, who does so much to help her. I talked her through it gently. She cried, then calmed down, although she wouldn't take no for an answer about dinner.

Snowstorm turned to rainstorm that day, and my queasiness decreased. But I began hemorrhaging blood. It would continue for the next three days. But after my morning conversation with Audrey, I started to manifest a diamond-like life-condition, full of boundless patience and compassion. Nothing could get to me, least of all my torrential blood loss. It was only a minor inconvenience.

I saw Sharon for dinner that night, although I could barely eat. The moment we were alone, she poured out her heart to me about the things Audrey says and does to her, and how grateful she was that I'd stood up for her that morning. I realized how much Audrey's abuse has damaged Sharon over the years, and I saw my sister as a human being for the very first time. It had never occurred to me that she would be one of the people who needed peace, comfort and strength. It turned out she needed it most of all.

Under this tremendous stress Audrey's destructive cruelty was out of control. But I found that the more appalling her behavior, the more genuine compassion I felt for her. And because she sensed my empathy, I was able to stop her from inflicting harm on others. She was never threatened by it. Instead we grew closer.

Meanwhile, at the hospital, another transformation was taking place. I've never been a natural caregiver. I'm awkward and don't know what to do. But I began doing things for Dad. Little things at first. Adjusting pillows, reading him the sports page. Soon, I was happily spending 10-hour days tending to his every need. By the end of the visit, I was the caregiver of choice. He ate for me, when no one else could get him to eat. No job was too gross or too private. He was happy to have me there. And he told me how glad he was to see me and my sister so close.

My last morning in Pittsburgh dawned sunny and warm, and my bleeding slowed as well. As I did morning gongyo, I felt vastly happy and content. Although nothing had changed, everything had changed, and I had more appreciation than ever for my Buddhist practice, which enabled me to transform bitter poison into lasting medicine.

P.S. My biopsy was, by the way, negative.

WT