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No Regrets

My mother, Emma Jean Gilles, was an incredible person. Forty years ago she was doing yoga, lifting weights and riding a Harley....

The minute I saw her when she arrived in Chicago — in June 1996 — I knew that her breast cancer of five years earlier had returned. Back then, she underwent a radical mastectomy. I had chanted — successfully — to extend her life for these five years.

But now, I felt grave doubt and confusion. I was frightened and angry. I received guidance, but I was angered by the guidance and disappointed in my seniors who basically told me to chant that she experience no pain and that whatever time she had left was spent valuably.

Well, of course, you ninny, but that wasn't enough.

That wasn't the guidance I really wanted from the universe. I couldn't see myself compromising and having to rationalize it. Rather, I needed to put all my chips on the table and chant for what I truly wanted: to again extend my mother's life. Not to avoid the suffering of aging and death — but to triumph over it.

Mom's breathing was labored. Her cough was frightening. She had trouble eating, was rapidly losing weight, and, of course, was very weak.

At first, I thought what I was facing was my own fear of death. But I quickly discovered that what I was truly facing was the fear of no faith.

What if I chanted with all my heart for my mother to survive and she didn't? I've never been able to pretend, at least not for any reasonable length of time. Would I be able to continue chanting?

After two weeks, I discovered that, yes, I would continue to chant, but I would not be able to continue as a leader in the SGI-USA. That would just be too hypocritical.

Every day was a challenge: the pain of watching the toll on my mother's physical condition — she aged 10 years in two months; the rigors of chemotherapy; the developing complications; the exhaustion of caring for someone 24 hours a day. My wonderful husband, Guy, and my children enabled me to continue my work and activities.

One day, Mom said to the doctor, "So, you think I'm going to die soon."

He said, "Yes, that's right."

Mom said, "You doctors don't know everything."

She didn't want to know how long the doctors expected her to live. But they told us: one week at the most.

We brought her home. She weighed 98 pounds, was on 24-hour oxygen and two forms of morphine. The next week the house was filled with many of her brothers and sisters from Arkansas. She spoke to each one individually about her life, her death and their relationship. She introduced each one to the Buddhist perspective on life and everyone left light-hearted and uplifted.

At the end of the month she was getting out of bed for meals and only using the oxygen at night. She was getting stronger. She joked about having to get better for the doctor's sake — because he doesn't get much encouragement, she said.

Through all of this Mom never complained. She was the best patient and took every opportunity to encourage everyone she encountered. Even the hospital staff had asked her to talk with other patients and share her understanding of death.

My sister, Tina, and the rest of my family talked about everything. We studied about death and examined our understandings and fears. We laughed, some of us cried, but Mom

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always said there was nothing to cry about. Early on, at Guy's instigation, we all made the determination to have no regrets.

The second time around, Mom began responding to treatment. The fluid around her heart became minimal, her liver cleared completely, and her bones began to regenerate. In August 1997 she hit a plateau; she was no longer responding to chemotherapy. But the cancer was not in remission; it was expected to return.

To continue our campaign of no regrets, we packed and went to Paris, my mother, my mother-in-law, my husband, children and me. We went first class (well, business class), stayed in the best hotels, did what we wanted to do and generally had a ball.

Mom returned to my sister's home on the Pala Indian Reservation in Southern California. My sister was having her sixth baby and my mom wanted to be there. She also missed her other five grandchildren (ages 4 to 13) terribly.

She did well until recently when the cancer became aggressive and went to the brain causing dementia. The process was relatively speedy, and the morphine dose was still fairly low. Even the dementia was beneficial; the confusion caused her to feel that we were always with her.

When I saw her last she weighed 120 pounds, had a full head of hair and no trouble breathing. She always recognized my sister and me and found a way to communicate with us. Even the last days on the telephone when she couldn't talk to me, I would chant and she would begin chanting.

Tina called from the continuing care facility at 12:30 a.m. on Mother's Day. They didn't expect Mom to make it through the night. Guy and I chanted until 2:30 a.m. It was the most incredible experience I have had in 34 years of chanting. There was no separation, no fear, no tears — only great joy, great appreciation. I began to hear the most beautiful sound I have ever heard. I still am at a loss to describe it. It was something like a cross between musical instruments and beautiful voices.

I think this must be the origin of Gabriel's Horn, or the singing of angels. But I think it's the actual sound of the universe. Chanting must be the closest emulation of that sound. Many people nearing death have told me that Nam-myoho-enge-kyo truly is the most beautiful sound in the universe — and that that's what they want to hear.

My mother died at 11:25 a.m., May 10, Mother's Day, in Escondido, Calif. She entered the latent phase of life peacefully after accomplishing everything she set out to do.

As deaths go, it was a good one.

This experience made me dig deep in my life for answers and made me examine my understanding of everything. The effort to define and harness the power in Nam-myoho-enge-kyo much of the time diminishes it. We, individually, need to dig into our own lives for the answers — no one can explain the Mystic Law for us. I feel that, through this experience, I have won a deeper understanding of faith.

To all my family, immediate and extended, Buddhist and secular: Thank you so very much for all of your support and your prayers.

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