

Life Lessons From Lily (Or...Thank You, Mom)

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My mom would have been 63 years old last week.

I say "would have been" because she passed away in 1998 at the not-so-ripe-old age of 51.

Because she was so young, perhaps, or maybe out of concern or even just as a result of garden-variety curiosity, people used to ask me ALL the time, "How did she die?" Or, "Oh....she must have been sick. What did she have?"

I never quite knew how to answer. I felt a bit ashamed. I would stress over this question, because I knew it was almost always inevitably coming.

For years, actually, I thought more about the question itself than my Mom herself or her life itself.

You see, my mom took her own life. That's how she died. For years, I wished she had something equally awful but infinitely more acceptable like cancer. (I know how bad that sounds....trust me, I know.) But nobody questions cancer or any other physically awful disease. Nobody.

But suicide...well, yea. Talk about a conversation stopper. It's right up there with the real big bad ones.

So, for the first few years, I tried to avoid **that** question and **that** conversation because I simply couldn't deal. It stressed me out. It took the conversation, permanently at that point, off how my Mom lived to how she died.

And ultimately, how she died didn't define her or even begin to explain her.

After some time, I began to get angry about the inevitability of this question. So I turned it around. I waited for the question and then spat my answer right back. I practically pounced on people with the answer. It shut them up, alright.

I felt that if they were asking, I was telling. If they couldn't take the answer...well, they

shouldn't have asked in the first place. And I would stop being ashamed of the answer. Because it didn't diminish who she was or how she lived.

And because a million other reasons.

After trying the brutal and immediate honesty route for a while (and as the reasoning behind it began to get old and make little sense), I began to focus more on my Mom and less on the "how" or even "why."

And only as I now come into my own voice, and learn who I am and why I am here, am I beginning to understand and appreciate and love and treasure who my Mom was -- now more than ever.

The best lessons I learned from my Mom were never immediate. Like so many of the best lessons in life, there is often a whole lot of living to do before any of them make any sense.

As a 10-year-old girl or an 18-year-old college freshman or even a 26-year-old new mother, I just didn't get much of it.

Oh, I thought I did.

I thought I was really freakin' smart.

And maybe I was in my own way. But as far as understanding my Mom and knowing how to live in the brilliance she taught me, nope. It has taken me into my 38th year to really start to get all that.

My mom, Lily (whose namesakes are my niece who turns 3 today and my own daughter, age 10), was indeed a beautiful flower in this world. And I am just thankful that I didn't go much longer without acknowledging how, without that beautiful flower, my life -- even now, 12 years after I lost her -- would be so much less sweet and full.

So thank you, Mom, for these:

- **Choose your stress wisely.** We all have a finite amount of stress our bodies and our minds can handle. Almost like a gas tank that is tapped into each time we freak out or stress out about something...anything. It is easy to empty the tank, and hard to replenish. Choose your reactions wisely, figure out what matters -- what really matters -- and react accordingly. Better yet, don't live life in reactive mode at all.
- **This too shall pass.** Nothing is forever. Your life may feel horrendous in any given moment. You may not have hope. It all may seem black. But that won't last. Guaranteed. Know this and trust in what's next.

- **Potential means nothing.** My Mom loved the movie "A Bronx Tale." She often quoted the line: "The saddest thing in life is wasted talent, and the choices that you make will shape your life forever." Knowing you are good or realizing all you can be is great. But, ultimately, it means nothing without vision and action and doing and work. All too many people let life pass them by without ever "going for it" and being who they were meant to be. Wasted talent, unrealized potential -- call it what you will...**Bottom line: It is a tragedy.**
- **Caring what "everyone" thinks is the worst waste of time.** We can't please all of the people all of the time. And instead of being OK with that, many of us invest a whole lot of time and energy into worrying and trying. We are afraid to disappoint. We try to avoid making mistakes. We don't want people to know we aren't perfect. And, oh, do we want everyone to loooooovvvvve us. And when we realize that not everyone loves us (it's inevitable), we aren't happy. We wonder what we did wrong and how we can make ourselves lovable to everyone and his/her mother. Instead, we should focus on what we do best and on who we do it for and be on our merry way.
- **And finally,** simply, no matter what your age, your place in life or the brilliance of your relationships, no one will ever, ever, ever replace your Mom. No one. So if you can, hug yours or tell her how much you love her today.

Tell her I sent you.