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A Christmas Cactus flower (Wikimedia Commons/MrPanyGoff, CC-3.0)



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This past weekend marked three years since my Mom passed away. At that time, I wrote about the [aftermath of saying goodbye to a parent](#) who also happened to be an addict.

Soon after my Mom died, my stepdaughter Heather gave me a Christmas cactus, with these beautiful and strangely delicious-looking, shrimp-like flowers.

For the third time now, it has spent the entire year on our bathroom windowsill looking cracked and arid, gray-green and seemingly barely clinging to life. Then a couple of days before Mom's death anniversary, it explodes with a bounty of luxurious, coral-colored blooms. It is an odd and comforting feeling of resurrection and hope, every time. Plus, it makes me hungry and inspires me to cook scampi for dinner.

This cactus has evolved into an apt metaphor for my relationship with my Mom. Prickly, hard to touch or nourish, dogged in its deterioration, yet holding within it these astounding vibrant colors which emerge rarely and suddenly, much like her rifle-crack laugh, her flashes of fierce intelligence and remarkable memory, after years of self-abuse.

On Nov. 10, 2015, my Mom died from gangrene in a bedsore on her leg, after quite literally allowing her once beautiful body to sit and rot. Mercifully, she was spared from most of that slow agony by morphine. Those of us who loved her did not have that buffer as we watched her literally crumble inwards.

It feels somehow fitting to me that Mom died at the beginning of the fall-winter marathon that is the Thanksgiving-to-Christmas stretch. This is a challenging time every year for us mothers and grandmothers. We have meals to prepare, houses to decorate, gifts to buy or make and wrap. The creation of holiday magic and special memories takes, quite frankly, a bunch of work.

My Mom is ever-present as my list-making, house-cleaning, meal-planning, gift-giving rituals start to roll. I have come to believe that people in our lives are either here to show us how to be, or how not to be. With all due respect for my Mom, she mostly falls into the second category.

"I was a little kid when I realized two things: as hard as I might try, I could not inspire my Mom to change her self-destructive habits, and I had a choice about mine."

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Because while my Mom was very good at all this stuff, she also was of a generation — or a particular personality — who seemed compelled to make every task seem difficult and arduous, squeezing each one for as much credit as possible. As each holiday approached, the pitch of her martyrdom sharpened, until the actual day inevitably found her harried, shrill and exhausted.

Of course, she refused my offers to help her along the way. So that when she finally collapsed in tears at her end of our Thanksgiving or Christmas table — unable or unwilling to actually eat anything because she "had to do every single thing herself" — the guilt that she required of me was compounded with the frustration of not being allowed to do anything to alleviate it. It was maddening, and in hindsight very sad; in milking each holiday for its opportunity to suffer, she had also wrung out the possibilities for joy.

I was a little kid when I realized two things: as hard as I might try, I could not inspire my Mom to change her self-destructive habits, and I had a choice about mine.

At some point, when I was very short, I put my hands on my chubby hips and made one of those life-shaping promises to myself. Someday, when I was the Mom and in charge of my family's holidays, I was going to do these things with happiness, or not at all. As my father said when we all piled out of the station wagon at Disneyland: "Now, we are going to have fun, dammit!"

So, I feel Mom all the time now. As I bake tiny pumpkin pies with our youngest granddaughter Mary. As I defrost the turkey and double-check I have enough brown sugar to glaze the ham. As I rearrange furniture to make room for a whole bunch of family and friends to come over and eat, and laugh, and play endless battles of Connect Four.

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But it is not with anger or resentment that I think of her. My hands rolling out the dough are her hands. My arms spreading the tablecloths are her arms. My legs going up and down the stairs are her legs. I am of her. And she is in me.

Perhaps one of the gifts she gave me, or compelled me to give myself, was this ability to choose. Joy instead of misery. Surrender to happy chaos instead of struggle for control. Laughing acceptance at my mistakes instead of martyring myself on the altar of perfection.

These holidays are often a really stressful time, but thanks to Mom, I know they don't have to be. It is my choice, and that is a great gift. I can stop and look around and breathe deeply. I can eat and drink. I can laugh and play. I can hug and kiss my husband, and kids and grandkids, and just be so glad we are all together. I can be relied upon to announce, "All my chickies are in one place!" — making my children look at each other and roll their eyes — and know that I am happy and blessed. And through me, so is my Mom.

She is like the flowers hiding in that cactus. You might not see her, but she is right here.

[Amy Morris-Young graduated from and taught writing at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.]