

“For You, I Had To.”

My mother has always been my biggest fan and my number one supporter. She loves nothing more than she loves her children. She always did her best to make sure that we were always happy and healthy, and she still does. One day, her worst nightmare came true; One of her babies was not okay, not healthy. In 1999, my mother faced a crisis of meaning upon hearing the news that I, her second child and first daughter, had Retinoblastoma (eye cancer). I was fifteen months old; She was only in her early twenties. At the time my mother had me and my older brother and she was pregnant with one of my younger sisters. I know a good amount about this situation, having experienced it, but I have always been the “victim” in the situation, so I was interested in what she went through as the mother in the situation. I was interested in knowing what kind of toll this whole situation took on her, because no one hears the words “Your daughter has cancer” and does not have a life shattering realization or flashing thought of “Why us?”.

K: Hi Mum.

SM: Hi hunny.

K: Thanks for doing this. Ready to start?

SM: Of course, anything for my baby. Go ahead.

K: Alright, first question. What is the event that triggered you to question the meaning of life?

SM: Your cancer diagnosis. That awful, terrifying, crazy whirlwind period of time. We had just gotten back not too long before from our trip to Disney. We were in the happiest place on earth but just weeks later we were in one of the worst.

K: Can you elaborate some on the emotions and thoughts you had during this crisis?

SM: You were so young. Your brother was so young. I was pregnant, so I was that much more emotional. All I could think is “Why?” and “How?”. All I wanted was for you to get better, I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t sleep. It was terrifying. It was sad. I was so afraid. We were struggling to find a doctor to treat you. You were just a baby, you know that. There wasn’t many doctors willing to risk anything treating a little girl like you, that is until we found Dr. Peterson. Duh, you know him. He was the first to accept you and Children’s [Hospital] will always be in our hearts for that. In a way [the diagnosis] was also partially ironic. Remember that article I showed you? That one Grammy gave to me just months before you were diagnosed? The one about the little girl with retinoblastoma? We read it thinking it was the saddest little story and then before we knew it we were living it. It was hell.

K: Yeah, I remember. She went through chemo and everything just to end up with enucleation like me.

SM: Yes. That was crazy, the timing of that article.

K: I think so... Moving on, how did you approach the feeling of meaninglessness? [As in] what did you do to elaborate on what the meaning of life is?

SM: I just stayed strong, for you, I had to. Of course I could only stay so strong for so long. Your father was always a little stronger than me. I could not understand why it was happening to us and it was like torture. I tried to keep my head up. I had to fight for you. I did so much thinking. I just couldn’t understand. I barely knew who I was. But I always kept it together around you, I needed to so you wouldn’t be too scared. I couldn’t stop thinking about ‘What if I lost you’. I couldn't help but wonder if I would survive if you didn't. So I fought for you. Once you got better, I felt better. I discovered

some of the most beautiful things after that because I decided to accept things for how they are. I take things one step at a time now, day by day.

K: In what ways has my cancer, and your crisis of meaning caused by it, impacted your life since diagnosis? And obviously I'm well now, but how did you cope with the change?

SM: I have always been running you around to doctor's offices and hospitals and that as slowed down a lot since those first few years, but you know I've always been happy to do it.

K: Clearly, knowing that I had cancer did not keep you from having more children, but did it make it more difficult or concerning?

SM: Yes. Of course. I was terrified. They tested me immediately to see if [the baby] was showing signs. Each of your siblings got tested more times than I can count. From birth to about age seven, once, twice, sometimes three times a year. Not [as much as] you did, but still, a whole lot of doctor's office and hospital visits. Not to mention trying to explain it to all of you.

K: Oh, I remember you trying to explain it to me. I was like five when I finally caught on that something was different, right?

SM: Something like that. I still remember little you looking up at me so confused; I can still see it, like it was just yesterday. You asked something about why you only had to put your hands over one eye to hide your eyes to count for hide and seek. And my heart broke a little bit every time that little brain or yours came up with a new question that I wasn't sure you were old enough to understand. Your siblings were tough to explain to but they never have been quite as stubborn and inquisitive as you. *Laughs*

K: Very funny. You know I get those traits from Dad.

Laughter

K: Alright. Next question. What, if anything, has changed in you after having dealt with such life altering news? Or how did you change after contemplating the meaning of life? Did you re-evaluate any aspects of your life and decide to alter the way you were doing them?

SM: In me? Well, like I said, one day at a time. I take health a lot more seriously. I know there was no way to prevent your cancer but there are things we can do to prevent going to so many hospitals again. I also take safety into huge consideration, I may even overdo it.

K: You definitely overdo it. Remember my glasses...

SM: I didn't want you to get stabbed in the eye with anything and go completely blind! I was just trying to protect you, you know that. I don't want anything bad happening to my babies. Never have never will. I guess these are not really in me, but they do bring out the motherly instincts in me. I'm a mama bear. Nothing gets between me and my cubs.

K: Okay mum, you're a mama bear. *Chuckle* Anyway, in what ways have you grown from facing this crisis?

SM: It matured me, definitely. You know I was in my early twenties, you'll be that age real soon. At that age you're still learning to be an adult. I was thrown into it so fast. It was like a wake up call. Life is hard, sweet heart, it's going to try to keep you down. That's what I learned when the nice little life I was building crumbled. Starting our own

family, we were so happy, and then life decided to teach us that not everything is all rainbows and butterfly kisses. I learned from it. I grew up a bit.

K: Did the crisis of meaning reappear again after the initial diagnosis, such as during the periods of time where you had to explain to others, and/or to me, what was happening?

SM: Not in it's entirety, but there has certainly quite a few scares since then that have made me overly nervous. You know that all I want to do is protect my babies. I never liked the way that some people started to look down upon you like there was something wrong about you because you don't have two eyes. I start to wonder why people have to be so rude or why they don't understand. You know what I say, it might be different or weird ...

K: But it doesn't make them a bad person. Is that why you like that saying so much?

SM: Yes it is. People shouldn't treat you different or badly just because you are a little bit unique.

K: I love you, Mum. Thank you again.

SM: Of course sweetheart, I love you too. Now come here and give me a hug.

After this interview, I feel like I have finally filled in the blanks on some aspects of my cancer, and even my life. My mother was strong even when she didn't feel like she could be. I am glad I thought of her when this assignment was mentioned. She is wonderful and an amazing human being. I am so unbelievably lucky to have her in my life, especially as my mother. This one little interview showed me that we are a lot alike. I'm glad I can be like her.

I think that my mother would take a liking to Marcus Aurelius' quote, "whether acting or reacting, your aim is the aid and betterment of others, in fulfillment of nature's laws" (pg. 109). No one had any idea I was going to be diagnosed with cancer. My mother was rightfully terrified. Everyone else in my family is healthy, so why us? Why her baby girl? It just happened and it was so unfair. Life is so unfair. But as unfair as it all is, my mother was not going to give up. She was not going to let anyone take her baby girl from her. So she acted, found me a good doctor, got me good treatment. She acted for me, on my behalf. She strove to make me better, which overall made her better. She is okay now, as long as her babies are.