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Our Promises to Her

by

D'Esta Love

She was born of Russian-German immigrants; English was her second language. She spoke only German until she started the first grade. She completed the eighth grade before quitting school to seek employment as a waitress. In 1938 she married a widower with two sons, and the following year she had a son of her own. Two years later her husband died, and she was a widow for 49 years before her own death. On April 23, 1990, she died in our home. Esther Marie Love was my mother-in-law; her son, Stuart, is my husband.

After her husband's death, she supported her three sons with a social security check and take-in ironing. When her boys left home, she became a domestic worker and as she grew older lived with elderly people who needed care and companionship. On weekends she cleaned my house. It was her "good deed." She came to live with us when Mrs. Marks died, the last person with whom she lived and for whom she worked. She lived with us three years before her death.

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It was not easy having her with us. Her life had been vastly different from mine and was marked by a loneliness I shall never know. (Outside her family she had few acquaintances.) As the years passed, she became increasingly reclusive to the extent that when she died she no longer left the house and rarely her room.

Her need to serve others was so deep and integral to her identity and self respect that she gave her energies to cleaning my house, doing my laundry, washing Stuart's car and working in the yard, so we would not need to. Although it sounds like a dream come true to have, as a friend of mine once described it, "a self-cleaning" house, it was the source of tension and conflict and subsequent guilt. Our privacy and autonomy were gone as was some of the harmony in our household.

She was also a woman of simple, trusting faith, but she expressed her faith differently from us. She thought we read too many books, spoke too much of theology, had become too sophisticated, and she worried about our "worldliness." But her God was close at hand, and I continue to marvel at that, although at the time I struggled with what I thought was an "oversimplified" view of God and his providence.

"When I die, I just want to lie in my bed and go home." "I don't need a doctor; God is my physician." "I don't need insurance; God will take care of me."

Her prayer had been, "When I can no longer work, I want to die." We doubted her when she said she was dying. She had always been a strong, healthy woman. She was only 76 and did not appear sick. It seemed she would live a long life, but she insisted she was going to die. "It is not that simple," we protested. But she made us promise, "No hospitals, no doctors, no drugs, no nursing homes, just a bed at home in which to die."

She believed; we were doubtful. How can a person just lie down and die? What of the process? What about our schedules? What was this promise we had made? Could we keep it? As it became clear to us she really was dying, we began to seriously question what we were doing. We asked lawyers and doctors for advice. It is not that simple to die anymore. Our lives suddenly became complicated and decisions difficult. At times I felt resentment that she had chosen my house in which to die.

But it was in dying in my house that she rendered her greatest service to me and gave me her greatest gift. We had always loved her, yet she was a difficult person to love. Her stern religion, her isolation, and her insecurities and low sense of self-worth created barriers which were erected around her but also around each family member. Our relationships were often tense and awkward, and I often held her at arm's length.

In the spring it became evident that she was ill and possibly dying. What of our promise to her? Should we just let her die? We decided our promise needed to be honored. We would care for her. I was not prepared for the weeks that followed, and I was afraid. Very quickly she was confined to her bed. On her last attempt to get to the bathroom alone, she had an accident and soiled the carpet and the bathroom. She was humiliated, and I was upset. It was my lunch hour, I was dressed in my professional best, and I did not have time for this. As I cleaned it up, she cried and in her discomfort repeatedly asked my forgiveness. My own discomfort was so great, I felt I carried the stench of it for days. I wondered how I could manage this obligation along with the responsibilities of a full-time job, and I dreaded what lay ahead.

But it was the beginning of a new relationship. In the ensuing days as I bathed her and changed her diapers, I allowed myself to touch her dying body and I found healing. As I touched her my fear and guilt and resentment washed away, and a transformation took place.

As I touched her dying body I saw her life. As I changed her, bathed her, medicated her sores, fed her and brushed her hair, I began to see the realities of her life. . .so different from my own. This was the

In the ensuing days as I bathed her and changed her diapers, I allowed myself to touch her dying body and I found healing.

character of her life. She had spent life caring for others — changing beds, cleaning up accidents, emptying bedpans, fixing meals, scrubbing floors — and it gave her joy. As I lost myself in serving her, I came to see her more clearly. Repeatedly I thought of Robert Hayden's poem, "Those Wintry Sunday Mornings,"

*What did I know?
What did I know,
Of love's lonely and austere offices?*

As I touched her dying body, I also saw myself. I caught a glimpse of my own mortality. We were separated in age by only twenty-five years — only a breath. My mind rushed ahead to my own death, and I wished for my own bed in which to die and my God to be near. For as I sat with her and cared for her, I often heard her whispering prayers and calling her savior's name. I also heard her whisper to me, "I love you, I love you." I prayed for such grace and such peace when I am ready to die.

As her sons came, they also found healing in the touch of her body. Max sat by her bed and read aloud from her Bible. (I suspect Max had not read his Bible for years.) He faithfully rubbed lotion on her feet and kept her mouth moistened as it dried out when she no longer took liquids. On Sunday he shared her last communion with her while we went to church. Karl brushed her hair and talked with her in his soothing voice, and together they remembered the stories of his childhood and wept of time gone by. Stuart's ministry was daily. He fed her, lifted her, changed her bed and spent hours with her. When he was not in class he was at her bedside. In his lifetime he had ministered with such grace to the families of many who have lost loved ones and to many who lay dying. Never before had his ministry in the face of death been so graceful.

Her grandsons also came. She let us all love her. More importantly, she allowed us all to serve her. To our surprise, we found comfort and healing,

reconciliation and love. As I watched the gathering of her family, I realized a bond of personal identity with her. While she was so different from me, and we often did not understand each other, we had these two things in common: our faith and our sons. These were her treasures, and they were all she had.

In the twinkling of an eye she was gone. We had thought it would be an eternity — this death process — but it was over before we knew it. We were able to keep our promise. It was our gift to her. Her gift to us was the joy — the peace — we found as we participated in the moment with her and gave ourselves to our mutual ministry of consolation.

After she died I packed her belongings. Her few dresses, gowns and robe fit in a small box. She had a shoe box which contained a can opener, one place setting of eating utensils and a paring knife. She had a communion cup, a few toiletry items and treasured photographs. After 76 years they were all the material possessions she had. But she had a worn Bible which testified to her faith and sons and grandsons who sat by her bed and called her “Mother,” a testimony to her love — treasures which do not perish. Surely she had chosen that which could not be taken from her.