

## PARTING GIFTS

by Puja Thomson

**MY MOTHER'S FIRST "PARTING GIFT"** came to me unrecognized and indeed unwelcome two years before she died. It was her cantankerous upset at my gadding about seeing friends throughout the 12 days I was back home in Edinburgh. "I don't know why you bothered to come, you haven't spent much time with us!" she said. Pangs of guilt, resentment welled up. Didn't she recognize the time I had spent with her? Old feelings of being controlled flashed up. The mother-daughter saga, and underneath, a truth—I *was* overextended and exhausted, torn in many directions, with many friends to see. I was fitting them in, a lunch here, tea or a walk there. It was true. I wasn't really with family, not in any depth. Perhaps she sensed that the sands of time were already running out in her life. "Don't come back if you're just going to use this house as a hotel for seeing friends," she fired.

I had to ask myself, what did I really want? On the one hand, I was angry at being told what to do, how to live, what's right, what's wrong, all themes of my youth and upbringing. On the other hand, I sensed an incompleteness and a possible step yet to be taken to bring healing to us both—before it was time for her to leave her body. I sensed a longing and a willingness to be more available to her before it was too late. She was in her eighties, and there was much I felt she could pass on. Yet I would not sacrifice my friendships. I loved the continuity in Scotland—of friendships that last over time and the inclusiveness that welcomed me each time I returned. I needed to find a new balance between family and friends on the shorter trips I was now making without running myself ragged. But I didn't recognize how little time she might have left.

And there's another sort of continuity in Scotland, which pulls me. It's the land. She and I are old friends. I've always walked her hills in all seasons and I could not sacrifice these special times of nourishment. Even in the city of Edinburgh, I need time alone to walk its streets, to let the skyline take my breath away, to feel its strength and experience its changing face.

There is so much I want to do in my life, and often too little time, and my mother often caught mistaken priorities in my life before I did. Although she frequently joked that I'd go my own

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way anyway, she always put in her ten cents worth. This time it rang deep. Several months later on my next visit, I was more clearly aware of the limitations on time, and planned accordingly to spend more quality time with my parents, opening myself to their love, experience and wisdom. I blocked out an afternoon and evening for an "Open House" where friends might gather together with me, and limited time for a very few leisurely meals or walks in the city with special friends or for me to wander by myself.

Sharing family photographs, found in odd places all over the house, became the focus of that visit: Evenings with my parents by the fireside sorting, sifting, yielded a treasure trove of memories as we participated in the ancient oral tradition of passing on folklore from one generation to another. Photos of my mother's grandparents in the walled garden of their Rose Street cottage in Thurso activated long lost tales of how my mother spent alternate summers there by the sea and of how my great grandfather, a rope-maker to trade, shared his musical talents as "Precentor"<sup>1</sup> in the church and choirmaster in the community. The other summer she learned to milk cows, deliver milk, and help with the harvest on her paternal grandparents' farmsteading in Aberchirder / Fogioloan in rural Aberdeenshire. I felt blessed by the deep connectedness of touching currents of joy and sorrow through my family's generations. This parting gift of delving deep into my heritage came the year before she died. Some direct talk of death crept in, about her will and a change of lawyer which showed her recognition that life in her eighties was a bonus, a precious gift which might end at any time.

Yet, there were moments of tension, too—like a flash of anger I shot towards my father on the evening before I returned to the States. We were all startled by what I said, although I can't remember what or why. I sensed it came out clean. Three months later, my brother, Iain and a friend visited me in America and reported back to Mum and Dad all the good times we had shared, and the intense argument Iain and I had near the end of his trip. I received a wonderful letter from Mum, sharp and lucid. She wrote: ". . . It must be getting fashionable to have a glorious pre-departure row! Dad and I have never spoken a cross word since you left in March. It seems a 'blowout' must do good," and she added, "You'll be able to tell your clients this from experience which may surprise them!" I think it surprised her!

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<sup>1</sup> - director of singing before the days of organs

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I arrived for my next visit to Scotland on a cold January day for my parents appreciated a visit in the quiet month after the excitement of Christmas holidays when they had plenty of activity. Mum had shrunk to seven stone (98 pounds) and seemed depressed. With my arrival, her old vitality came back, but she overextended herself and plummeted down again, exhausted and listless. She did not travel with us outside Edinburgh, but she welcomed my offer of massage and hands-on energy healing. This new intimacy relaxed her body, lifted her spirits and relieved her sleeplessness. I began to feel a reversal of our roles, as she accepted my "mothering." I returned home to America energized instead of drained, filled with the shared memories of time well spent together—but not knowing how little time she had left.

*Saturday, April 20, 1991, 5:30 am New Paltz:* The phone rang. I was up making hot apple cider vinegar and honey, an early morning habit. One ring and I was there. It was Iain. "I've got bad news, Mum just died." Tears welled up as he talked. For a moment I didn't quite get it. "When can you come over?" got me focused on what had to be done—a myriad of practical arrangements to be there in Scotland for the funeral. A weekend workshop was already scheduled to start in my home in 5 hours. That could continue but I would need to cancel clients on Tuesday on Long Island. Yet my mind still wandered, with an incomplete picture around her death, and its unexpectedness. I hung up, thanking him for phoning right away.

Instinctively, for the next hour I took all the energy from the call into meditation. What a gift! Such a clear, deep feeling of peace and calm, a knowing that she was already reconnecting to those she loved in the light, and that all was complete between us. Such an encompassing sense of being loved and cared for, and that she had chosen to go—Osho, my meditation master, had taught well the blessing it was to be close to death. My house in New Paltz was filled with freesias, my mother's favorite flowers. I let the fragrance fill me, then asked Matthew, my partner, to hold me as the tears flowed, before facing the practical realities. I leaned on his strong shoulder as I made the phone calls—canceling appointments, making travel arrangements, preparing for the workshop. As waves of feelings ebbed and flowed, I learned to reach out for the help I needed and found it willingly given. My associate group leader, Richard, was right there, assisting me in the group. My *Angel Card* message, "*Simplicity*," helped me sort my priorities and pack efficiently.

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By lunchtime two days later I was in Edinburgh, hugging my father with the tears flowing between us. I was happy that he had the first good nap in several days after lunch that day, after sharing the sadness and talking of the happy memories... It was good to be home.

My mother's mind had been clear as a bell—except when her memory escaped her! I heard that the previous week she had expressed some frustration about being reduced to knitting plain squares for dishtowels—a major reduction in skill for someone who mastered the most complex designs and created intricate work. Her spirit was willing, but her heart was failing. She had been admitted to Edinburgh Royal Infirmary for medical tests the following week, but before they took place, she died. It was clearly time for her to go. On Tuesday, Dad and I went to see her body at the funeral home. A shock of momentary non-recognition brought its own unexpected gift. "It's not Ena," Dad said emphatically. A peaceful face and frail hands, but it was only a shell of my mother, so clearly had her spirit gone on. This made the funeral and cremation service much easier. Another gift, this time in the form of community support, came on the following days from those who had come to offer their thanks with us for her life. We could see her through their eyes. Our birth family was small, but we had always treasured our friends, our extended family. Their presence completed the circle and upheld us in their love. The service, as well as the tributes focused on her trust and faith in her God, her friendliness and generosity to others, her inquiring mind and her skill as a needlewoman. I would never have guessed how this dimension of support and appreciation would lift me up in the long hours ahead of clearing out her things. My mother was also a packrat.

This chore of sifting through, and deciding who should get, her clothes, jewelry and sewing, became the daughter's privilege. It was a time for me to be with her quietly and privately. This intimate way of saying goodbye enabled me to own how much of who I am came from her. Like mother, like daughter! Her skill, love of crafts and gardening; her enquiring mind, intuition, strong personality and need to control, her ability to overcome shyness; her need to make her own contribution in defiance of social constraints by returning to teaching rather than living only as "the minister's wife"; and her ability to make a little go a long way, and recycle everything.

And through it all, a treasure hunt to challenge me. A year before I had asked my mother to write down her early childhood memories a few of which she had shared with me. I was sure

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she had begun this task, but there was no immediate clue as to where I might find it. My father didn't know if it did indeed exist. Fairly soon, I found two pages of handwritten notes, fascinating personal and social "herstory", including memories of the "Great War" (1919-18) prior to age seven, headed "*pages 4 and 5*". But where were pages one, two and three, and were there others? On the eve of my departure I found the missing three pages, with the heading "For K and F. (Kathleen and Fiona, her grandchildren), at the suggestion of A.J.T. (that's me, christened Anne Joyce Thomson.) So, here were her earliest memories written during the last year of her life. Typically, they were among her sewing patterns!

Back in America after these tasks were done, on May 31st, on the eve of what would have been my mother's birthday, a beautiful white and marmalade stray cat arrived, skinny, fearful and very hungry, claiming our attention with her insistent squeaks. Immediately, I named her, "Ena Firefly," as she darted away and came back just as fast as the fireflies all around.

On Easter Sunday, 1992, exactly a year and one day later, it was wintry outside. I was with a friend in front of a fire blazing at the hearth, celebrating the turn of the seasons: Birth, life, death and resurrection. As we looked out, a wild goose (the Celtic symbol for transformation) flew over, and I gave thanks for my mother's life.

*Adapted from an article written by Puja Thomson and published originally in Creations Magazine.*