

Chapter 2. Overcoming Adversity

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Barbara Cantor, Who have I been? Who do I want to be? Who am I now?

A Daughter's Task

Jeanne Simonoff

Living through the Alzheimer's disease of my mom, my father, my Uncle Dave and the dementia of my aunt and father wore me down. Made my emotions threadbare, so much so that I was in the mode not of feeling but of surviving. Protecting myself as best I could for this time-limited task of caregiving.

In that time I did well. Some of it was past knowledge, long ago, of my grandmother's early dementia seen through my eyes as a two-and-a-half-year-old, then my father's dementia 19 years ago, which later was diagnosed as Alzheimer's, my aunt's dementia until her death also 12 years ago and, yes, even my mother's ongoing Alzheimer's.

That twelve years has given me the time to mourn, tear my clothes, pour ashes over my head, bury each of them in the ground and know that I am here. I have survived and learned.

What have I learned? Knowledge comes the hard way. I needed distance to bring it full circle. I have survived. Here I am as I sit and write. May my learning make a clearer roadmap of process, of the concept that I learned so many years ago from spiritual leader Ram Dass: Be here now, in the moment, side by side with your loved one. The time will come soon enough.

I capture a memory of Esther. I see her swaying to my singing at my Bat Mitzvah. Her snapping her fingers to Yismachu. Her shouting out "That's my daughter." Her knowing, in some connection, that this is a special day. It is the day of my rite of passage. I am 62. She is 94. I was denied my rite of passage at the age of 12 because "girls didn't do that" back in the Fifties.

My mother was in assisted living then. From time to time, I would meet the ambulance at the hospital after a fall, a spike in blood pressure or blood sugar, a stroke. Sometimes, waiting outside the doors as the ambulance pulled up or arriving after she was in the emergency room.

There was always that full smile, one of love, of recognition: I was something special to her, and my smile echoed that sentiment.

I have a photo that my friend Donna took of my mother and me after my Bat Mitzvah ceremony, one of glee and happiness for both of us.

I remember the rabbi getting ready to give me a special blessing and asking him to wait so that my mother could be on the *bimah*, the pulpit, with me as I carefully helped her up. Then the two of us with our backs to the congregation, facing the Holy Ark with its display of the Torahs, the trees of life, standing there, my arm over her shoulders as the benediction is given.

“May God bless you and keep you. May God cause his countenance to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May God grant you everlasting peace, shalom.”

It was only six weeks later that my mother died after a fall, hip surgery, the familiar scenario of so many of the elderly: sepsis, poisoning of the blood, and her passage home to her God.

As I wrote this, I felt the warmth of her smile. Her love never faltered. None of their love did. My father, Bubbie; my mother, Esther; Aunt Minnie; and Uncle Dave. Some things go in and out of my memory, but that moment up on the *bimah* will be with me forever.

The twelfth anniversary of my mother’s death just passed, that day after Halloween, All Saints Day that others celebrate. After the fall, the hip surgery, her stay in a skilled nursing facility, and the trip when she was rushed back to the emergency room again.

Each time, I thought this may be the last time. After being in the trenches of this disease for so many years, I thought about how I would write this whole story, how I would talk not about the disease itself but about what I learned in my heart of hearts. How it can be possible to enjoy each moment and take away no regrets.

I kept a journal all these years, telling myself that when I got brave enough to write about it, I would call it JUST NOW. The time is at last here.

Jeanne Simonoff was born in Hollywood. She grew up with the love of words, music and films. She is the author of Saving Myself: A Los Angeles Childhood (Writeout Press, 2010), and a chapbook of poetry, 13. She’s working on a second book of poems and a second memoir on living with her family’s Alzheimer’s and dementia. She lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.



Jeanne Simonoff in 2011
[Photo by permission]

A Second Chance

Virginia Degner

In 2007, I retired from being a foster care social worker. Seven days later I had a heart attack and “flatlined.” Thankfully, they were able to revive me. While recovering, I felt I was being given a second chance and pondered what I wanted to do with this opportunity.

Writing had long been a part of my life. I did television talk shows, wrote feature stories and reams and reams of press releases for other people. I wrote feature stories for newspapers in the 1970s and then decided to pursue my master's degree in clinical psychology. I achieved that goal in 1996 at the “young” age of fifty. I became a social worker and spent a few years “writing” long reports. As I looked back after my heart attack I realized that I had used writing in many ways but never as I truly desired.

What I wanted was to write a novel and I enthusiastically embraced this project. My first novel, *Without Consent* was published in 2011. It is a thriller, but also a love story about renewal and hope.

Since then, I have found a number of ways to use my writing for things about which I care. I have written four books of Haiku poetry that I hope will aid others in their reflections and meditation. I encourage readers to write haiku poems of their own personal journeys. I'm currently working on a memoir and teaching memoir writing at my local adult school. I also maintain a website on parenting issues (www.theparentconnection.info).

My life today is exciting and interesting. My husband Duane and I have been married for fifty-four years; we have three children and four grandchildren. We travel for pleasure and have promoted my books on road trips throughout the United States. We are joyous and free, and I am so grateful to have more time to write. I'm embracing my second chance at life with gusto.

From Haiku Poems of a Woman's Journey

My heart is mended
Stitches even and careful
Beating like bird wings

Soar like an eagle
Gliding through sunlit shadows
Royal bird brings joy!

Peace, joy, love, power
I savor the sun setting
My creator reigns!

Warm hands hold teacup
Healing tea fills my body
I hug the sunshine.

What is my purpose?
Nourish and love Your children?
Enjoy Your earth, sky?

Virginia R. Degner of Castro Valley, California is the author of eight books. She has a master's degree in clinical psychology and is working on her ninth book.



Virginia Degner (2014)
[Photo credit: Nancy Rubin]

Who have I been? Who do I want to be? Who am I now?

Barbara Cantor

I address my seventy-four-year-old self while holding my husband's hand as he takes his last breaths.

I have been a wife, a companion, mother to our children, soul mate, co-captain of our boats and

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our lives, loved. Fifty-two years, blew by like hurricane winds. I want to stay the same; I do not want my life to change but at this moment it does.

I will no longer have a help mate, someone to come home to and tell what happened that day, laugh at films with, dance, go on road trips, sail on the Bay, get answers to “do you remember...?”

I will walk take out the trash, pay the bills, mow the lawn, get the oil changed in the car, review the car insurance and assume new responsibilities, handle alone all the little things he used to take care of that I will not remember until they appear.

We did not discuss which car to sell or when I should list the house. I cannot ask him now what of his possessions he wants the children to have. I will go through his clothes and remember things we did when he wore that jacket or cap.

I want to be who I was. I do not want to be who I am now, starting a new life.

The song “I will survive” rings in my ears. That is a starting place.

XXX

Fast forward. I am now seventy-eight, I am not a shrinking violet even though I made many mistakes in the past four years, like being taken advantage of, cowed by workmen, the guy who bought the riding lawnmower, selling the wrong car. But they were my decisions, right or wrong.

I felt I was not capable of handling everything but sat myself down and reflected on what I did in past years. I was a registered nurse, I took on totally new responsibilities like leading a PTA, testifying before the school board on behalf of my school, editing/publishing a small international magazine, managing a marina, learning to sail, passing the real estate exam on the first shot.

I began standing up for myself and decided I could and can do anything, I am a capable woman, I can figure things out. I am good at researching what to do, like following YouTube instructions to unclog the toilet. So what if I use a notebook for doing finances and not Quicken.

I managed by myself to downsize from 2800+ to a 1600 square-foot rental. And that was handled enduring a fractured sacrum and sciatica from tripping over a box. So severe, I was hospitalized for pain management a week after I moved. But I did what I had to, got it done. I still feel I am in someone else’s house.

The little black rescued cat that lived on the streets for the first seven months of her life is part

of mine. She is not the cuddly, loving cat I so wanted and needed but how could I return her to the shelter? We love one another gingerly, cohabitate. It is good to have something alive to take care.

My husband and I sailed together for nearly thirty years, an absolute passion for me. I learned the widow/divorcee truism that suddenly your friends who are still couples have become acquaintances. I have never sailed on their boats, as promised, nor invited to dinner.

Happily I occasionally get out on the Bay as volunteer crew for Chesapeake Region Accessible Boating, which offers the joy of sailing to handicapped adults and children – and me too. We had donated our boat to CRAB, a good thing but a deep loss for me.

And the woman I am today, for pleasure, morale-boosting, socializing and learning:

- I do what I can for my children and grandkids, physically and financially;
- Religiously go to the co-op studio and continue with my stone carving;
- Serve as a back-up Djembe drummer in a drum circle;
- Take classes – especially autobiographical writing;
- Serve on the advisory committees/boards of groups such as the local Senior Center and Golden Eye gallery at Arundel Lodge, a studio that helps mentally ill and depressed clients though creating art.

I keep learning something new each day. My morning wake-up is to play “Words with Friends” on Facebook, yes a non-personal contact but contact nonetheless. I will survive.

Barbara Cantor grew up in Pennsylvania, older by three years to her sister. Barbara wanted to go to art school or become an engineer but her parents said no. What should a young woman do: teach, be a secretary, or a nurse? The latter had been her mother's dream so pliable Barbara got her degree in nursing education. She was married to the same man for fifty-two years; he has been gone over four years. Their three children and grandkids are important to Barbara but they have their own lives to lead.



Barbara Cantor in 2014 [Photo by permission]