

February 7, 2007

Dear Friends,

I've decided to turn the usual custom upside down and send YOU a birthday greeting on the occasion of my mother's 91st birthday, which is today, February 7. Since you were so kind to respond to my letter last year I want to stay in touch and let you know what's up. My basic message is this: Marjorie is absolutely fine and shows no signs of slowing down. She is of course suffering the infirmities of old age but she carries on with dignity and panache. What else would one expect of Marjorie after all?

Although the dementia medication makes her unsteady, her body is surprisingly youthful, and she has plenty of energy and is game to do things at the drop of a hat. She's also incredibly healthy. Bob and I usually plan to spend three evenings a week with her and since we work an hour away in Middlebury, on a weekday evening we often don't pick her up until after 6:00. She's very impatient waiting, so by the time we get there she's usually in a state. But once we're in the car and on the way to our house she's good to go until 10:00--and her first interest is in having a glass of wine. She still loves a party but now she prefers to sit quietly and watch. She's just happy to be where something is going on. I don't know how many times she's turned to me in the middle of a gathering and said, "This is my kind of living!" She is also very fragile--in the sense that if she's overtired or not feeling well everything begins to come undone.

Everyone who knows Alzheimer's tells me that her dementia is quite different from anything she has lost both her long and short-term memories. For another, beyond her inability to keep track of even the smallest daily details she has a remarkable grip on big concepts and is able to speak quite eloquently on such topics as her philosophy of life. She also has an amazing feeling for the ridiculous and is forever stopping me in my tracks with her insightful offhand observations. And it's clear that she knows what she's trying to say even when she can't find the words she's looking for. If I'm patient and take the time to really listen--and do some creative interpolation--I can usually figure out what she means, and what starts out sounding nonsensical turns out to be appropriate and to the point. That's on the bad days. On the good days she can find the words. So it's clear that her interior life is as rich and full as ever, it's just the link to the world outside that sometimes is scrambled. It also makes a big difference if she's relaxed. When she feels on the spot and is trying too hard, nothing works. It's also very apparent that as things are stripped away, unresolved personal issues start to emerge. This was true for my father and is especially true for my mother. Although she doesn't remember her mother's name or practically anything about her, her mother is constantly on her mind. She remembers that her mother didn't want her, that her mother never showed her love or affection, that her mother was remote and unavailable--and she wonders how this person could have been her mother. She moves from this to thinking that she never knew her mother, and in fact she never really had a mother. Then she'll ask if I know anything about her mother. The sad fact is that all of this is true. I'm sorry that she has to re-live it now but I also know that she's been dealing with this for her entire life. Our strategy is to shift her focus to our love and acceptance other-- and it seems to work. Marjorie is more loving and responsive now than I ever remember her being before. And most of the time she's clearly happy--very, very happy.

My mother refers to Bob and me as "the boys" and the first thing everyone we meet through her says is "So you're the boys!" If I mention Bob by name, she'll ask me who he is, and when I tell her he's the other boy she's immediately satisfied. She's very aware of Bob because if I come to pick her up alone (which is very unusual) she immediately wants to know what the other one is up to. Here's my favorite "boys" story: Whenever we have a party, she's always the first one here, and one time when the house looked especially bright and inviting, she turned to Bob and said, "You boys are much better housekeepers than the boys who usually live here."

At some point last year I realized that she'd started telling people that she'd never been married. Her line of reasoning was that she's always been on her own and has had to make things work for herself. In a sense this is another legacy of her miserable childhood, but in another way it's true-she HAS always made her own peculiarly individual way. When I ask "What about Earl?" she immediately responds that Earl was a charming guy who meant really well, but they never were really intimate, they never really knew one another. Again, in a sense this is perfectly true. So then I ask, "But what about me? If you were never married, then who am I?" and she immediately responds, "Why, you're just the greatest guy!"

More recently she's taken to asking me about my mother, is she still living, where is she, and I say, "Well, that's easy to answer because you're my mother." That always stops her in her tracks because it isn't the answer she's expecting. One time she was incredulous and wanted to know more. Last week her response was "No wonder we get along so well!" Nothing fazes her and she rolls with the punches. If someone asks her where she lives, a question that she can't possibly answer, her response is often something like "I'm a citizen of the world." Here's another vignette: When we were leaving the office of the neurologist who treats her dementia (whom she loves and who always makes her feel competent), he asked if she'd brought a purse. In response she stood and turned toward the door with a coy smile, saying, "Nothing fell to the floor!"

Your cards, letters, and photographs last year were wonderful and we spent many hours together reading each one and talking about whom you are. In most cases she recognized your name but couldn't really remember you, the person. But whether she remembers anyone or not is immaterial because she loves the attention and the pleasure she takes in hearing from people is very real. Most things are in the moment for her now and those moments are no less enjoyable, no less meaningful than they ever were. It's just that when the moment passes it leaves no trace. So even though it sounds like a contradiction, please do stay in touch. We will enjoy your mail over and over again-and she loves it when I read letters aloud. If you can ever come for a visit I guarantee that she'll recognize you. Not by name of course, but she'll know that she knows you and that you have a history together even though she hasn't a clue what that history is. Just like with me. She may not remember that I'm her son, but she knows for sure that she's delighted to see me.

Bob and I, and our children, and Marge, of course, send you birthday greetings.