

FORGIVENESS

Presented by Jennifer Kaye as part of the spoken-word Six Minute Memoir event held on September 25, 2020, with forgiveness as its theme. The Six Minute Memoir series invites individuals to share 6-minute personal stories on a range of topics at ticketed events, with proceeds going to selected charities. For more information, visit <https://www.annebokma.com/6-minute-memoir-live-events>.

I got a call from my mom one day, about 20 years ago. I would have been in my mid 30s, and she and my dad in their early 70s. She was calling to tell me that an ambulance was on its way to their house because my dad was slumped over the steering wheel of the car, unresponsive. He had just pulled in the driveway after doing some errands.

I kept her on the phone until the ambulance came, and found out that she had heard the car pull in, but didn't hear my dad come into the house, so she looked outside and could see that he was still in the car. She waited a bit longer, and then went out to see what was keeping him. As she got closer, she could see that something was very wrong.

The ambulance took him to St. Joes Hospital, and I met them there. My dad was rushed into emerg, while my mom and I gave the admitting nurse the information she requested. And then we waited. We feared the worst, and so it seemed like a long time before the doctor came to speak with us. He invited us to follow him through the door and into a corridor that was lined with people on gurneys.

And there was my dad, seemingly asleep, with no IV connected to him, and in fact no sign of any medical intervention at all. The doctor leaned in and said quietly to my mom "Mrs. Kaye, your husband is very inebriated. We're going to give him some time to sleep it off and send him home."

When you live with an alcoholic, humiliation is a common experience. My dad embarrassed me many times in front of friends and strangers during my teen years

before I left home. And my mom had long since stopped accepting social invitations. But this was a whole new level of gut-corroding shame. I knew this was going to cause the argument of all arguments between my parents and I just hoped that I could get them home and leave before the sparks started to fly.

Eventually dad came to, and although he was still drunk, he was able to walk out of the hospital unaided. My mom's fury was palpable. I got the car and picked them up, and before they could say anything, I warned them "If you say anything while I'm driving, I will pull over and leave you both on the sidewalk." I must have been convincing, because we drove to Stoney Creek in one of the most uncomfortable silences I have ever experienced.

My big mistake was accompanying them into the house. Mom erupted as soon as we got inside. I sidled towards the door, but she yelled at me to stay. I rarely disobeyed her, especially if there was a risk of experiencing the full force of her formidable anger.

I had heard many arguments between them about my dad's drinking, usually with my mom doing the yelling and my dad sullenly withstanding her wrath while denying her claims. But this time it was different. I think we all realized that what had just transpired was a whole new level of dysfunction. My mom was totally out of control, her fury spilling out of her in powerful waves of hatred and blame. And my dad was in tears, the shame of it all being too great to deny.

I can't remember the actual words my mom used to express herself during the argument; what sticks is the intensity of her emotions. But I remember something my dad said, clear as day, with an anguish that was heartbreaking. "I need you to forgive me."

To forgive him. For 25 years of lies and deceit. For 25 years of chaos and anxiety. For repeatedly putting our lives and the lives of others at risk while driving under the influence. For making us think he might be dead, when really, he was just hammered. It's a lot to ask. And yet, by asking for forgiveness, my dad had admitted for the first time that he had done things for which forgiveness was an appropriate response.

I knew that dad was right – unless my mom could find a way to respond to him with love instead of hate, there would be no way forward for them. And I also knew that my mom couldn't do that. And she didn't.

Was it fair for my dad to ask for forgiveness after 25 years of unhappiness? Was it fair for my mom to withhold it, guaranteeing more unhappiness to come? Fairness and forgiveness are often at odds, pitting truth against mercy and head against heart. An unwinnable battle.

When the argument subsided, I had a moment alone with my dad, and I was able to tell him that I had forgiven him. Somewhere along the way, I had been able to put mercy ahead of truth, and to feel compassion for him. I am so glad that someone was able to tell him he was forgiven on that awful day.

But my mom is a different story. Even though I know first-hand how difficult it is to live with an alcoholic, I haven't been able to forgive her for being unable to forgive my dad. This seems unfair to me, but while my head believes that she deserves forgiveness, my heart isn't yet convinced. Fairness and forgiveness at odds once again.

As a result of this incident, my dad's driver's license was taken away. Since he had hip issues that limited how much walking he could do, he no longer had any real freedom, and was mostly sober and depressed until he died just a couple of years later.

My mom missed my dad terribly. She was a master of denial, once responding to me when I mentioned my dad's drinking problem by saying "What drinking problem?" Mom lived for 17 years after dad died, eventually developing dementia, which smoothed some of her rough edges. It wasn't hard to be kind and to put the issues of the past aside for the sake of her wellbeing in the present.

My Mom died in September 2020, just shortly before this remembrance was written. I have read that grieving is a process that brings heart and head together, and so I hope that I may find some forgiveness for her in the weeks and months to come.