

Maria Leff

My mother, Maria Karl Leff, had a wonderful and blessed life. Psalm 126 proclaims “Those who sow in tears will reap in joy.” That was truly the arc of my Mom’s life.

She sowed in tears – her early life was marked by being born in Austria on the brink of war, March 28, 1936. Her father Joseph, who owned a restaurant near Salzburg, was killed when Mom was 7. He was a cook in the German army, and he didn’t like wearing a helmet. Her mother Maria – whose love life would no doubt make a fascinating novel of intrigue and deception – abandoned little Maria shortly thereafter, leaving her in the care of a stern aunt and uncle. Mom never spoke about her mother. I always thought my maternal grandmother was also killed in the war – I didn’t learn different until I was 40, a few years before I accompanied Mom to the funeral of the grandmother I never met in life. She has two brothers and a sister, but did not really know them growing up as they were not raised together. Mom moved out on her own at the age of 14 and never looked back.

But she surely reaped in joy – with three children, 11 grandchildren, and one great grandchild, all of whom know Maria as the powerhouse of unconditional love. She loved living in Denver, she loved the mountains. She took joy in the simple pleasures of life, like drinking coffee on her balcony watching the sunrise, going out for drinks with friends. The rabbi Ben Zoma said “who is rich? He who rejoices in his lot.” Mom rejoiced in her lot – she truly appreciated the blessings in her life, and did not waste her energy on envy for those who had more or who had an easier life.

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Mom was not religious. She was raised Roman Catholic, but found God more in nature than in the church or synagogue. When she was 18 she met and fell in love with an American GI – my father Michael, “a nice Jewish boy from New York.” They were married in Germany; I was born in the US Army hospital in Heidelberg – but after their arrival in New York City five months after I was born they had second ceremony, a Jewish wedding for the family there. I’m sure my mother had no idea that when she agreed to raise the children Jewish before that wedding that she would end up the mother to a rabbi. Mom was proud of the accomplishments of all her children and grandchildren (she once told my brother Bill “I have ten grandchildren, and none of them is in jail!), but I think she was still a bit mystified about how she became a rabbi’s mother...I guess it’s true that God works in mysterious ways!

The Jewish tradition teaches that we have a three-part soul: *ruach*, *nefesh*, and *neshamah*. *Ruach* means wind or spirit – it’s the life force, what in Asian philosophy is called *ki*, the animating force that we share with animals. The *ruach* ceases to exist with death. *Nefesh*, which means soul, life, and rest, is the part of our soul that contains our personality and memories, the bulk of what we think of as who we are. The *neshamah*, which means breath as well as soul, is the deep pure part of us that comes from God and returns to God.

Mom’s *ruach* is gone. Her *neshamah* has returned to its source in God, reunited with her loved ones who have passed on before, especially Leonard Holder, who helped raise my sister Karen, and Bob Perkins, the love of her later life, and with her father who she lost at such a young age.

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But part of Maria's soul – her *nefesh* – lives on each of us, and it will live on for generations to come in her kids, grandkids, great grandkids and friends.

When I insist on cleaning up the kitchen before leaving the house – even when we're rushing to get the kids to school – that's Mom's soul living on within me.

When we remember to put on clean underwear before going out – lest we get into an accident, and the medical people have to remove our clothes – that's Mom's soul living on within us.

When we notice things that others are oblivious to – and just take care of them, like the time my friend Michael and I were making music, me on piano, him on guitar, and Michael's infant son Daniel desperately needed a diaper change, and both the new dad, Michael, and the experienced dad – me – were oblivious, and Maria just picked Daniel up and changed him while we kept making music – that's Mom's soul living on within us.

When we make sure we look nice before going out, when we ask friends to destroy unflattering pictures of ourselves, that's Mom's soul living on within us.

When we go to the mountains and enjoy a beautiful view of God's most excellent handiwork – and we really remember to appreciate it – that's Mom's soul living on within us. This chapel is such an appropriate place for this service – as any of her friends know, and as anyone who has visited her from out of town knows, Red Rocks was a very special place to my mother.

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But far and away most importantly, when we love our children with all our hearts, when we love our children even when they make the biggest of mistakes, when we love our children even when they do things that would drive any normal person to disown them: that's Mom's soul living on within us. We are blessed to have received that reservoir of love from her that we can pass down to coming generations. Given her difficult childhood, I have no explanation for where all that love came from, other than to say it was a gift from God.

Vincent Van Gogh said "Love many things, for therein lies the true strength, and whosoever loves much performs much, and can accomplish much, and what is done in love is done well." Mom accomplished much and it was all done in love and done well.

Very few of us ever have our love tested as thoroughly as my mother did. In 1967 my brother Bill came home to New York after spending two years at a home for children with severe asthma here in Denver. Within two weeks of coming home, Bill was in the hospital, in an oxygen tent. The doctors gave my parents a stark pronouncement: if you don't move, your son will die. It must have been a horrible thing to hear. With three young kids – I was 12, Bill was 10, Karen was 4 – we moved. My father quit a job he loved – he was a detective on the NYPD – and my mother left behind the only family she had in America, her cousin (who was like a brother) Tony Karl and his wife Agnes and their kids, who had followed her to New York.

Not long after our arrival in Denver, my parent's marriage collapsed, and after a couple of years of struggling in Denver my father remarried, moved back to New York, and pretty much disappeared out of our lives. If

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my mother had any bitterness over her lot – working two jobs and very long hours to support her three children, an ex who was no help with raising the kids, alone in the middle of America with no family within 2000 miles – she never showed it, never voiced a complaint, never took her frustrations out on someone else.

My brother, sister, and I all went through our stubborn and rebellious teenage years. All I can say is thank God we don't still follow the Biblical prescription for the stubborn and rebellious son, which was death by stoning, and thank God my mother just kept loving us through all of our trials and tribulations. I'm sure that her love is what got all three of us through our difficult teenage years.

We are right now in the middle of a Jewish holiday week called Sukkot, the festival of booths, which in a way is about celebrating sharing love. We are commanded – commanded by God – to be joyful this week, and to share that joy with everyone around us, with family, with friends, with the poor, with the stranger in your gates. “To spread the love around.” Mom passed away on the first day of Sukkot. At first my reaction was, “How I am ever going to be joyful on this holiday?” But I remembered my mother's attitude – always happy with what she had, not envious for what she didn't have, and Ben Zoma's advice about who is rich, and I realized I have much to be joyful for – as do we all.

We all have our special memories of time spent with Maria—Mom—Omi. My daughter Katherine spent a few weeks with her Omi this summer, and when it came time to go shopping Karen and Kiyah suggested she go with Omi. “Omi?” was Katherine's surprised reply. I suppose she didn't

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think her 74-year-old grandmother would be the best fashion consultant for a 14-year-old Israeli-American. They told her, for sure, Omi will know what looks best on you better than you will! And they were right.

For Kiyah many of the special memories center around food and learning special recipes from the master chef; for Joey hiking right here at Red Rocks; for Kiri, advice given on the way to the hospital in Steamboat; for Heather having breakfast together. For the Mattern family one of the special memories shows something we all know about Maria – she was there when you needed her. She helped out at the ranch with a group of German hunters who needed a good translator – and with Mary who needed a friend willing to get up in the cold and dark at 3am to feed a bunch of hungry German hunters. And she was always there for her kids and grandkids, especially at the birth of a grandchild, hopping on a plane to Texas, to California, and even to Israel when there was a new member of the Leff clan to welcome.

We all know there are some guests who are “high maintenance” and a drain on your energy – there is an old Yiddish saying that “guests and fish start to stink after three days.” But not Mom – quite the opposite. When she came to Israel when my youngest was born, my wife Lauri and I were both very disappointed that she couldn’t stay with us longer than three weeks. She just took care of everything that needed to be taken care of, she was the best houseguest in the world. But she wanted to get home to her own space, to the mountains, to her “private time.”

Bill and I will both miss talking to her on the phone to get her advice and to update her on the grandkids a few times a week. Memories will no

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doubt bring the most joy and the most heartache to Karen, who had the great good fortune to live here in town with Mom. My mother was not just Karen's mom, she was Karen's best friend, and every place Karen drives around Denver there will be another memory of a happy time.

Mom and I are both morning people, and whether at her place, at my place, at the ranch or on vacation, we would often be the first ones up and would sit together and enjoy coffee watching the sun rise. Her morning coffee was something she enjoyed right to the end: last week in the hospice early one morning at dawn I sat by her bedside, holding her hand and crying. She hadn't had anything to drink in days, and I was sad to think I would never again sit with her outside on her balcony drinking coffee. But she wasn't quite ready to give up on her morning coffee; a few hours later we pushed her outside in a wheelchair for some fresh air, and Matthew showed up at just that moment with a Starbucks Frappucino, and she said "that looks good" and one last time she sat outside enjoying her morning coffee. Matt was God's angel, delivering coffee to his grandmother just in time.

Being in the hospice – and before that, being in the hospital, and dealing with chemo and drugs and doctors and surgery – was very hard on Mom. She didn't like drugs or doctors. Up until the last two years I don't think she ever took anything stronger than a rare aspirin for a headache, and she almost never went to the doctor. She was healthy and that was her self-image: when she was in Monterey a few months ago, she fell and broke her foot, the first and only time in her life when she broke a bone. They took her to the doctor and when she was told she had a broken foot,

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her response was “no, my foot’s not broken!” As if such a thing was impossible!

Mom had a really harsh reaction to chemo, and she hated tubes, she hated needles, and she hated feeling poorly. She was content with her life, she felt she accomplished what she was put on this earth to accomplish, and all she really wanted was to leave in peace. But I believe she put up with a long round of chemo and side effects and doctors and needles because of her love for us – we weren’t ready to let her go. And I am so glad that we had an additional good year together, that she had more time with friends and family, that she was able to make it to Heather’s wedding. But we are also glad for her that her struggle is over, she is at peace after having lived a wonderful life and enriching all of our lives.

Her friend Mary summed it up the best: “Maria was with you through hell or high water. She always will be one of the most wonderful women I’ve ever known, she won’t be gone, she’ll be trying to talk to us and tell us what to do and how to live right.”

Mom, we love you, we miss you, and we will do our best to honor your memory by living right.