

Viewpoints

Faced with hard road, Mom did right thing

Most mothers give life to their children. My mother couldn't do that. Instead, she gave me something only she could give: the life I lead.

My mother, Marie, had a hard life. She grew up during the Depression, and prosperity was not right around the corner for her and her eight siblings. Her father had a stroke, and she had to work to help support her family. She worked as a clerk in a drugstore. She was a movie-theater usher.



Randall Howe

(She saw *Gone With the Wind* so many times she could never watch it again.) On Sundays, she played the organ at several of the churches in her small town in Colorado. She did what she had to do to help provide for her family. She didn't ask herself whether she enjoyed herself. She didn't ask whether she was fulfilled. She just did whatever was necessary because it was the right thing to do.

My mom wanted a family of her own. She left Colorado, married twice and returned frustrated. She began dating my father, David, her eldest brother's best friend, and they soon married. Mom could not have children of her own, so my parents adopted a baby boy in 1955, named him David and began their family. In 1961, they adopted a baby girl, Debbie. After the adoption, my parents learned that Debbie was mentally disabled and had severe cerebral palsy. Heading

My mother was born in 1910. Her real name was Margarethe, but everyone called her Sandy. She contracted polio as a toddler, and the disease atrophied her left leg. She hated math and spoke Spanish. As a young woman she attracted men but didn't seem to give a damn, which only intensified their attraction...



Phoenix's dreams of downtown misguided

"The characteristic of the present age is craving credulity."
— Benjamin Disraeli, 1864

If he were alive today, the great Victorian politician would have a field day. Convinced that all great cities must act or look alike, our current crop of planners, developers and the policy elites now has much of America's media bamboozled into a series of what are, in reality, urban legends.

One of the trendiest "legends" today is that a "great" city must have a thriving, big downtown. This is necessary, we are told, to attract major corporate headquarters, world-class research and, most important of all, the precious loyalty of the much ballyhooed "creative class," whose exacting tastes seem to require extreme densities and urban flair of a Boston, a Chicago, San Francisco and Manhattan.

The current obsession with downtown also appears to be driven by a prevailing critique of Phoenix as a second-rate, dysfunctional collection of suburbs.



Joel Kotkin

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Mitch Albom

mentally disabled and had severe cerebral palsy. Heeding the medical advice of the time, my parents surrendered custody of Debbie and placed her in a home for the disabled. My mom believed that was the right thing to do, but that decision traumatized her and made her hard.

My parents adopted me in 1961. Six months later, they learned that I, too, had cerebral palsy. This time, however, my mom refused to go through the same pain she had experienced just two years earlier. She believed that she and my father were meant to have a child with a disability, and they decided to give me the best life they possibly could.

My mom saw to it that I had

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Randall Howe is chief counsel of the Criminal Appeals Section of the Arizona Attorney General's Office.



Courtesy of Randall Howe

Randall Howe shares a moment with his mother, Marie.

Margarethe

A Mother's Day story in five parts

By Terry Greene Sterling

My mother and I sit on her bed. I pound away at the laptop, recording her every move like a scientist observing a lab rat. My mother understands my reasons.

She digs into her black Kate Spade purse, which she carries with her everywhere, even to the bathroom.

The purse has engrossed my mother for over an hour. She has most of its contents on the bed now: the tattered St. Teresa holy card; the black kid gloves she wears summer and winter; the dark glasses in the over-size frames that make her look like a bug, now that she has gotten so tiny; the orange "Do Not Resuscitate" form; the dollar bills she gives her great-grandchildren when they visit; the cheap earrings she ordered from the Jewelry Channel; the torn envelope filled with Rolodex cards bearing addresses of friends and family members who have either died or stopped visiting her because she is not herself anymore and they can't take it.

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Terry Greene Sterling is a contributing editor for "Phoenix Magazine" and a faculty associate at the Cronkite School Arizona State University. She is a three-time Virg Hill Journalist of the Year winner.

has finally gone too far

Syndicated columnist Mitch Albom is a great writer, an ab-fab talent who appears to have committed just one journalism sin.

Actually, make that two sins. Avid Albom defenders like *Los Angeles Times* media critic David Shaw and all the media-ethics mystics at the Poynter Institute and elsewhere are correct that the star columnist of the *Detroit Free Press* should be forgiven for the first ethical lapse. For what it's worth, I mystically concur.

But, in the name of all that is right and good, the *Free Press* should have Albom clear out his desk for the second one.

I loved *Tuesdays With Morrie*, Albom's bestselling book. All that sentimental, life-is-what-you-make-it stuff and the big-picture moralizing? Just excellent. Why didn't I think to make life-friends with my college professors? I can't remember a single name.

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Read MacEachern's column every other week in Viewpoints. Reach him at doug.maceachern@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-8883.



Doug MacEachern

Of the moment

A weekly snapshot of the people who make news.

The return of Frankenbride

Jilted groom still wants to marry flighty bride

— **CBC (Canada) headline**

"Don't marry her!"

— **Motorist driving past home of groom John Mason**



"My commitment before God to her was the day I bought that ring and put it on her finger. And I'm not backing down from that now."

— **Groom to Sean Hannity**

"He's as crazy as she looks."

— **Lucianne.com reader**



Ric Feld/Associated Press

A man drives his lawnmower past a billboard of runaway bride Jennifer Wilbanks in Duluth, Ga.

"He still wants to get married! Somebody needs to tell this guy there are plenty of other crazy women out there."

— **Jay Leno**

Runaway bride may face charges in Georgia

— **ABC News headline**

Is the real ball and chain in her future?

— **Kansas City Star headline**

MARGARETHE A mom seen through a daughter's eyes

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"Mama, do you miss your friends?"

"No."

My mother's bobbed, soft, silver hair separates where she has slept against the pillows. She has blue eyes. She is proud of her nails, which are manicured spears painted melon-pink. She wears her favorite peach-colored satin nightgown and blue terry cloth robe, which is stained with coffee and soft-boiled egg.

I'm not the greatest daughter. I haven't dressed her yet, and it's Mother's Day. I need to take her to the toilet, remove the sodden Depends, wash her, squirt Colgate on the soft toothbrush, comb her hair, rub lotion all over her so she won't get bedsores, dress her, stand behind her as she and the black Kate Spade purse inch into the living room. I'll settle her on the couch and give her an *Antiques Magazine* and the newspaper and turn on the Jewelry Channel and bring her some cranberry juice or maybe a vanilla-flavored Ensure.

"Mama, time to get dressed." I jump off the bed and throw

myself into a hopping-jumping jig I invented when I was a little kid. Years ago, my mother and I named it the "wangotango dance." I am 55 years old, a mother, grandmother, wife, journalist and university teacher. Yet I will wangotango all day long if it makes my mama smile.



Terry Greene Sterling

And it does. I love it. I grab the digital camera, take a snapshot. I will transfer the picture to my computer hard drive, then save it on a CD just to make sure. I am driven to take notes and pictures of our time together because I think if I record everything, it won't be so tough once she dies.

This is what you need to know about my mother before she got old.

She was born in 1910. Her real name was Margarethe, but everyone called her Sandy. She

contracted polio as a toddler, and the disease atrophied her left leg. She hated math and spoke Spanish. As a young woman, she attracted men but didn't seem to give a damn, which only intensified their attraction. She was an attentive listener, well-read. She never exercised. She worried about getting fat. She was a fashion model in New York, despite the gimpy leg. She lived in Shanghai, China, for two years where she attended diplomatic parties and resettled Jewish refugees fleeing the Nazis. She talked about China throughout my childhood, and it bored me.

I am her only child, but she outlived three husbands. In 1944, her first husband plunged from a skyscraper and lived for an hour. Her second husband, my father, lived with her on an isolated cattle ranch in Yavapai County. Her third husband was a grump.

My mother and I knew exactly how to hurt each other when we were both younger. I would say she drank too much with stupid rich people. She would say I was a knee-jerk liberal. I would say she lacked a college degree. She would say I lived a dull life. We

were both right.

We wouldn't talk for a day, then we'd go to lunch.

She started failing about five years ago. Once in the hospital, a careless doctor ripped apart several inches of papery skin on her leg. It took months to heal. When I was cleaning the wound one morning, she asked me to promise to never again take her to a hospital.

I promised.

My mother can't get out of bed today. I wheel her from the bathroom to the hoist chair in the living room. Her tiny, rosy body cracks and creaks and seems to weigh a thousand pounds when I lift her. I set the Kate Spade purse by her side. She sleeps and sleeps. When she is awake, she smiles when I wangotango. I wonder if she does it to be kind.

The next eight days all bleed into one long day. My mother won't wake up. I think she is in a coma. The hospice people bring a hospital bed and mouth swabs and liquid pain medicine. They take her pulse. They feel her feet.

If I try to move my mother, she grimaces and says

"ahhhh" and one eye sort of opens, so I squirt the medicine between her gum and her cheek and wait for it to take effect before I turn her. I smell death in her sweat. I don't know if she can hear, but I tell her over and over I am fine; it's OK to leave. Of course, I am not fine. I am terrified. I sing the family lullaby. I say the rosary. I rub ointment all over her body to prevent bedsores, but they come anyway. The chaplain blesses her.

If she doesn't die soon, I will die.

My two daughters and I sit by my mother's bed. We don't know if she suffers. We give her medicine just in case. We hold her hand and rub her feet and prop our elbows on the bed and laugh and weep.

At dawn, I hear a tiny, tiny last breath. A wisp.

We try to wash her body. This is supposed to be a sacred ritual, but it is awkward and exhausting. We dress my mother's corpse in a white silk robe. We fasten pearls around her neck. We snip locks of her hair and preserve the precious

cuttings in a sandwich bag.

The men from the funeral home wrap my mother in a sheet and lift her on a gurney, but her face is uncovered. I kiss her for the last time, leaving lipstick on her white forehead. Then I cover her face with an embroidered handkerchief.

This Mother's Day, I do not have a mother.

Sometimes, I sit on her bed in her room, which seems hollow and empty. I was wrong about the journaling and photography. It did not ease the unexpected numbness, rage, guilt and sorrow that wash over me in awful waves. Still, I remain the driven archivist. I have gotten rid of a lot of my mother's possessions, but before I dispose of anything, I take pictures and write in the journal on my computer. There are boxes for Good Will. Boxes for family members.

But I cannot part with some treasures, like the black Kate Spade purse. It sits on my desk, contents intact, but I am not strong enough to look inside.

It is a relic of our last days together.

HOWE Mom did what was needed

From Page VI

medical care I needed. From the time I was 6 months old until I was 12, I had surgery twice a year to relax constricted muscles and to straighten deformed bones that prevented me from functioning. My mom drove me 50 miles twice a week to the hospital in Denver for physical and occupational therapy so I could learn to walk and dress myself and do all those things most parents take for granted that their children will learn simply by living. Mom never complained about all the extra work and all the emotional strain that accompanied raising a child with a disability. She did what she had to do because it was the right thing to do.

In an unbelievable coinci-

child, just like any other child, who needed an education, and she was going to see that I was educated. The school board relented when a principal from an elementary school across town, who had experience with children with cerebral palsy, offered to have me attend his school. Mom drove me every day to the school and home again for the next six years. She fought for my right to education and inconvenienced herself daily to see that I was educated because it was what needed to be done.

Growing up with a disability was not easy or always pleasant. I hated having to be in the hospital so much, I hated the therapy, I hated not being able to do what other children could do so easily without thought. But I learned from my mother that

