

2018: The Jewish Home

As a gay-Jew, I'm surely the poster child of what it looks like to be a mama's boy. My mother and my umbilical cord seemed to have been made of stainless steel, and nothing over the past 65 years has broken it. But now that she's 97, suffers from severe dementia and no longer recognizes my voice when I call from San Francisco, "our" umbilical cord, like a paper clip, is being bent in many directions. Soon, I know it will break.

When she was 90 and her husband died, she moved into The Jewish Home in Reseda. I got to know her new friends, the custodial, social services and nursing staff in the Eisenberg Building. After her fall three years later, I came to know those who cared for her in the Factor Building. And now, it's the angels in disguise who attend to her every need in the Goldman-Zimmerman Building who I engage with from 400 miles away.

My mom and I used to speak morning and night for 30-45 minutes each time. I've been coming to visit her every two months for the past 7 years. But now I call twice a week. I visited her yesterday, two months since my last visit, but will not come again until October. The time has come for me to move on. Deep down, she and I both know it. We've been practicing saying goodbye to each other since I was a baby. We're through practicing.

I only know the names of some of the angels at GZ1, but I'd like to commend them now in writing: Marica, Grace, Maria, Norma, Karen, Liz, Brittany, Leor, Elizabeth, the Russian woman who delights the patients with her positive attitude and the female janitor who tends to anything she sees out of place like a nurse in an operating room.

I know none of them are doing it for the money. And I know that because if they were, you'd be paying each of them a million dollars a year. Their dedication and patience to the patients is beyond anything I've ever seen before. If you could bottle their virtues, you could go into a very profitable business on the side.

I know that I won't be able to write to you like this once my mom dies. The time for me to express myself to you is now. When I was a kid of nine, I was worried about having to go into the army because I'd have to leave my mother's side. I was worried about her leaving me when I was about 50 when I separated from my former [Jewish] boyfriend and found myself alone as an aging, gay man in San Francisco without connection to any family but her. But God, in His infinite love and wisdom, has chosen to peel off the Band-Aid on my existential wound very slowly. Removing it entirely now isn't going to hurt. I'm confident of that. And my new [Catholic] boyfriend is amazing! When God closes a door, He opens a window. You just have to look for the window and find the guts to climb in.

[Change of metaphor] Life is a school, God is our Teacher, and we're all classmates trying to graduate with as high a degree as we can in the time allotted us. As a Holocaust survivor, my mom had to take on her educational challenge in this academy on Earth backwards. Surviving the Nazis earned her a Ph.D. in Jewish Studies. Divorcing my father in 1960 turned out to be her master's thesis in Women's Studies. Accepting me as gay in 1974 cinched her B.A. in the Humanities. Marrying her second husband at the age of 55, after raising me as a single mom for 17 years, made her feel like a high school sweetheart for 35 wonderful years of marriage to the man she loved. Losing him was harder for her than graduating elementary school for me when I was a child. But now she's dealing with her, long neglected, nursery school education. I'm very proud of all that she's done – backwards and often in heels! [Some face where they're *going* in life. Others face where they've *been*.] But no pupil could be blessed with a better tutor than I was.

This world is nothing more than a one-room schoolhouse. We're all in this together. You never know if the next person you meet is in kindergarten or a post-graduate candidate majoring in "me." Torah explains this using a different metaphor; that of seeds [Adam and Eve] planted in a garden.

But the modern world we find ourselves in today is no longer a garden full of sprouts and shoots. It's now an orchard filled with massive trees of knowledge and trees of life. Just look at what Israel is producing after 70 years of growth! The fruits of some people's labors are sweet indeed! And God's love is the greatest of all we consume.

The Hebrew word for orchard is "pardes." Life truly is a "par-a-dise" if you know how to view it with an educated eye. Sure, there's a serpent hanging down from every tree of knowledge, but there's a worm in every apple, too... The more you know about yourself, the better off you'll be.

At long last I'm getting to the reason for writing this letter: to remind you that you, the executive staff, must know a great deal about yourselves. You've hired students from the front row, nearest the Teacher, to work at

The Jewish Home. Congratulations on *how* you're doing *what* you're doing. It's very impressive and sets a standard of scholastic excellence for the whole class. You couldn't make me feel prouder to be growing old.