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Why I'm Really Not Sure I Want To Live To 100

By Michael B. Friedman, LMSW

When I tell people that my mother is 100-years-old, they typically say, "Isn't that wonderful!" as if being very, very old is good in and of itself. And they usually add that I "have good genes" -- meaning that, happily, I too will probably live to be very, very old.

This comes from people as old as me (I'm 72), who say things like "You're only as old as you feel" so as to avoid saying about themselves or anyone else who isn't decrepit that they're old. They have a horror of being old, but think it's wonderful that my mother is 100. Hmm!

"I'm not sure I want to live to be as old as my mother," I often say, breaking with the etiquette of these conversations. Sometimes I add, "I'm not sure that it's good that she's lived to be 100". Horrible breach of the filial duty to love my mother, I know. But there you have it. The truth is that sometimes I think she would be better off dead.

I'm not sure, however.

Yes, my mother is not the person she once was. She was a psychologist with an active practice until she retired. She was a go-to person in the family when help was needed. She and my father had an active social life. She traveled on her own because my father was terrified of flying. They had a long if imperfect marriage. After my father died, she had a great and long love affair with a widower, who died when she was about to turn 99. Into her early 90s she swam every day and walked substantial distances at a very fast pace. She used to brag that her doctor said she had the body of a 30-year-old.

Now, she's different. Her memory is very limited. She needs a walker to get around at a very slow pace. More and more she uses a wheel chair, which she used to find totally unacceptable. She had to give up driving years ago, a great blow to her independence. No one asks her for help anymore; she has become the helped rather than the helper. Work is long behind her. She has lost all of her friends. Family mostly do not get in touch. After all, it's difficult to have a conversation with someone who asks the same questions over and over again and who doesn't remember phone calls or visits anyway. Now that her lover has died she feels totally alone. Phone calls and occasional visits from her sons and grandchildren can't make up for the emptiness. I have the impression that except for meals in a communal dining room, she mostly stays alone in her room at the lovely assisted living facility where she lives. The staff tell me, however, that she participates in some activities that I don't know about because she doesn't remember them.

Is this a way for a woman of considerable achievement and pride to live?

There have been a few times when she has told me or my wife that she'd rather be dead, but mostly that was shortly after her lover died. She misses him terribly, but she seems to accept that she has to go on without him. There is no hint that she wants to rush to join him -- something which she does not believe will happen anyway.

She often asks, "Why have I lived so long?" But that's not her way of saying she no longer wants to be alive. It's a literal question. "How old am I?" she repeatedly asks. We tell her. With amazement she says, "100! How did that happen?" She always adds the same story about being a sickly baby who was not expected to live. "I fooled them all," she adds. She used to lie about her age so as to seem younger. Now she takes pride in being 100.

She also is interested in her grandchildren and great grandchildren, when she remembers them. We have surrounded her with pictures of them and of events like our daughter's wedding and her own 100th birthday party to help her remember. And whenever we talk with her, we tell her what's happening with them. She seems to like to know even if she retains the information only for a few minutes.

When we visit, it's clear that lots of people know her and like her. They greet her in the hallways. She smiles at them and sometimes asks "How are you?" Occasionally she says, "This is my son and his wife." Once we've walked by, she often says that she doesn't remember who they are, but without distress. She actually seems to take pride in being known -- like a politician who says, "Great to see you buddy," to everyone who comes into view.

So my mother has a life. It's not the life she once had. It's certainly not the life she envisioned for herself. It's definitely not the life I want her to have. But she seems to find it a good enough life.

I think now that I would hate to have a life like hers. But how can I know? When faced with the alternative, maybe I'll change my mind as my mother apparently has.