

Hi Samantha,

February 12, 2020 (November 2019 letter)

As I promised in my last letter, I will tell you a bit about my parents' decisions regarding cataract surgery and other technical aids. I expect you will face these issues with your own parents and with your own life some day.

I can't help to wonder how different my parents' lives would have been if they had been willing early on to get the laser surgery.

My father, for example, resisted cataract surgery because he heard of someone whose surgery failed in some way. In spite of all the people around him, particularly my aunts and uncles, who had successful cataract surgery, he focused on the failure. I imagine what life would have been for him during those final years if his condition were as bad as mine. Watching television (without captions of course because they are useless unless you have somebody to read them), playing card games, or just watching his family and children would have been a major burden throughout most of those years. It's no wonder he would be faced with fatigue. One of his most pleasurable activities—playing with computers, electronics, small items, solving problems of everything from toasters to cars—would have been outside of his abilities merely because his eyes would not support it.

A similar situation occurred with respect to his use of an electric scooter. He resisted using such a device for a long time in spite of the fact that his back pain made it extremely difficult to walk. When he finally gave in and got a scooter, he enjoyed it immensely since he would use it on daily "walks" around the neighbourhood and for visits to places and events that were impossible before.

My mother faced similar challenges as a result of her resistance to laser surgery. One of the remarkable things about Mum was the way she loved to go for walks. Wherever she walked she would do so at a very fast pace. I remember how difficult it was for us to keep up with her as she headed off down the street, even in her later years with her walker. It didn't seem that she was keen to get somewhere quickly, but this was just the way in which she operated as she went about her business. We always thought of this as a wonderful feature and of course, kept warning her about avoiding a fall by watching where she was going in her fast pace.

We were all shocked and dismayed to hear about the day that she fell and hit her head. Fortunately, she was quickly transported to the hospital and they began dealing with the fact that her head injury had damaged her memory to some extent and would require a considerable amount of work for her to recover from her concussion.

It was a stressful time for all of us as Mum gradually got memories back, but she expressed how they all seem to be mixed up so she couldn't organize them in a way that would make sense. Fortunately, her powers of communication remained strong so we could work with her through the process and gradually help her put together the little pieces of memories, vignettes, and experiences, that she had so carefully developed over her life.

To find that someone who cared so much about the stories of people was no longer able to manage the challenge of understanding and organizing them was a great worry to all of us. It brought into prominence the incredible value of the family albums that she had put together. These albums not only provided the pictures but they included the stories that went with them. We had not anticipated how much her work on these albums would one day provide her with such a therapeutic benefit!

These materials helped her organize her past and the flashes of memories so that she could gradually work her way back to some order in the chaos. Of course, this was accompanied by the steady and wonderful support provided by Jennifer and Harrison who lived with her at that time. Not only was this an opportunity for her to have someone nearby who could help her do the organizing, but it meant that both Jennifer and Harrison were fortunate in being able to hear those stories as they were reconstructed and developed through the process. I will forever be thankful to Jennifer for taking this on and doing it in such a supportive and loving way.

It was the tumble, concussion, and unfortunate results that got me thinking about the role of cataracts in Mum's life. As I went for my own walks, especially in the ice and snow conditions, I realized how important sharp eyesight is to help us navigate the bumps, curbs, and other obstacles in our path.

This must have been the world that Mum navigated in her cataract fuzziness. She had expressed to me the difficulty of curbs when getting into cars, of walking on uneven ground, or traveling over grass and other nonpredictable surfaces. Of course, this didn't stop her from walking, but I expect it significantly reduced the times when she would think about doing it alone.

Like my father, she resisted the opportunity for laser surgery. She always justified her reluctance because it would mean that she would need someone to help her put drops in her eyes four times a day for about a week or so. True to form, Mum resisted a situation where she had to depend on other people. She did not like to disturb their lives in spite of the fact that so much of her life was organized around helping, supporting, and encouraging others.

The experience was repeated with Dorothy, when her hearing started to fail. She resisted the exploration of hearing aids until her hearing had deteriorated to a stage that was rather severe and her mental capacity and motivation to master the challenges of a hearing aid were getting very low. As a result, the complexities of managing the technology and coping with the more limited sounds that they produced remained a source of frustration and not a challenge to be overcome. It takes time for one's brain and attention to make sense of the way in which hearing aids transmit sound. It's not a matter of simply hearing better, but the challenge of filtering out extraneous noises and deciding which are important and which are not, is significantly compounded by the fact that hearing aids amplify extraneous sounds.

I remember similar issues with Greatma Reimer. I noticed it when she would ask us to thread a needle for sewing, help her with the identification of places for mending, and periodically bemoan the fact that her eyes no longer helped her to do the things she loves.

Dealing with Dorothy's resistance led Fran and Daegan to add an item in the "Red Book" about starting early to resolve such technical limitations. I'm thankful to my myeloma for bringing these lessons to me at a time when I'm able and eager to act on them. My cataract surgery has reinforced the wisdom of this lesson. Perhaps you should check out the Red Book soon.

Love