

It was Thanksgiving, 2015. My son and I had driven 350 miles as usual from Los Angeles to the Bay Area to be with my mother and sister for the holiday weekend. To brag just a bit, my mother was smart, very physically fit, and took no prescription medications until age 90 when she developed back problems.

After the usual turkey, the four of us settled in to play pinochle, a card game played in my family since before I was born 66 years ago.

Pinochle is not a difficult game, though it occasionally involves some strategic decisions. As of that date, I would guess my mother had been playing it for 85 of her 91 years. She had always been able to win at least as often as anyone else in the family. But this session was far different. She couldn't seem to follow the game. Also, she had an annoying nasal drip which she seemed not to notice, which required my sister (her co-tenant and caregiver) to clean up repeatedly. I couldn't believe our mother had either problem and told my sister after we finished that Mom was definitely deteriorating and needed to see her doctor. It was hard for me to believe that the woman who had always been so mentally and physically capable had sunk to this level.

The doctor seemed relatively unconcerned; she seemed to think it was part of a pattern of gradual aging, the kind that would be expected of a 91-year-old. But she didn't think it was anything sudden or anything that called for medical intervention. As a long-time trust lawyer who has had many clients nearing death, I knew what the doctor was also saying: my mother was nearing the end. As a son, I resolved to visit her much more often. As her lawyer, I reviewed in my mind what documents had been drafted. Her Advance Health Care Directive was as good as it could be. Her POLST form, which provided for making her comfortable only, was in order and signed by her current doctor and posted on the front of the refrigerator so firemen would know about her DNR wishes. Her provider, Kaiser, had copies of the forms in their system. All the paperwork was in order.

The next four months passed without any large medical changes in my mother. She did have her 92d birthday, which I told my sister would be her last if what had happened to many clients held true in her case. About six weeks after her birthday, Mom was having breathing problems and she saw her Kaiser doctor again. After a series of tests, it was determined that an inoperable tumor between her heart and one of her lungs was the cause of her breathing problems. Based on what my sister told me about what the doctor said, I concluded my mother's body was wearing out. It might be the tumor would get her or it might be something else but the result would be the same. Kaiser advised putting her in their Home Hospice Program to make her as comfortable as possible during whatever time she had left.

I last saw my mother eight days before she passed. The woman who had been so physically able from childhood was still able to sit in a living room chair, get up and walk slowly to the bathroom on her own. But only barely. And the smart woman I had always admired was unable to converse with me in any meaningful way.

Just after the time I last visited my mother, pursuant to the instructions of the Kaiser nurse, my sister started giving Mom morphine shots to help with her breathing and pain. Mom soon became

bedridden and the Kaiser visiting nurse said it would not be long. My sister did what she could with lots of assistance from Kaiser. The final day things got much worse. That evening, my mother said to my sister "I'm tired. Please let me go." My sister said everything was okay and my mother could go. Ten minutes later, she was gone.

Am I happy that my mother died? Of course not. Am I happy her suffering is over? Yes. Am I satisfied that my sister and I did not inflict any extra pain on her? Yes.

"Please let me go." Final words of a wise woman who knew her body was giving out and it was time to move on. And honoring her wish was the way her children said goodbye with love for all she had done for us.