



# Memorized versus known.

Serenity later?



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A few nights ago, my 84-year-old mother--who suffers from advanced heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and now also dementia--called me to rant again. This time it was about the *LIARS!* who staff the southern California assisted living facility she's called home for more than a decade. Tiffany was lying about her medication supply! Bethany was lying about expiration dates on her pills! They were both lying about how often she should take her Metformin and when she was allowed another Tylenol with Codeine!

She went on like this for a while. Having just talked to them earlier that day, I had a different view of these women and their good, or at least professional, intentions. They may have made some mistakes. I listened to my elderly mother's sad rage and then did the most remarkable thing. Nothing.

Her dementia is relatively new, but the ranting is not. She's had her moments of charm, sweetness, and rational benevolence, but her primary modes have always been passive-aggression, sudden rages, paranoia, sarcasm, and ceaseless negative judgment. It has taken me a long time to roll my apple self as far as possible from her dysfunctional tree. The tree is in the pit of a steep valley; I have to remember to fight gravity.

In early August, she left me a rushed, breathless voicemail, sounding as if she was about to be kidnapped. I suppose she was, in her own mind: she was being *forced* into an ambulance by the Brookdale staff for *no reason, just a little wheezing!* A former OB/GYN, my mother had been self-medicating for asthma with an Albuterol inhaler she'd gotten somewhere without prescription. In the ER they diagnosed the real problem: acute pulmonary edema, i.e. fluid in the lungs--a life-threatening situation she insisted on downplaying. She began clamoring nonstop to be taken home as soon as possible.

After that first call I'd flown to California already in crisis, believing she might die at any moment. Upon seeing her, it was clear she was still very much alive, but also that she'd never fully recover from this event and needed at least a month of rehab before she'd be able to return home. Her belligerence was very upsetting, but I let myself understand that it came from fear. I could see why she might not want to risk dying in the rehab facility.

I was back home in Baltimore by the time she regained enough strength to be discharged, but I invoked my attorney-in-fact status from across the country and arranged it all. Her first call to me included many thanks to me--which was unusual, and nice--but immediate new complaints. The next day came another call, and then another. Sometimes a rational question tucked inside the rant, but mostly just rant. This person a liar. That person incompetent. Everybody greedy, sometimes even evil. Etc.

She's very deaf, so responding was pointless. During my California visit a few weeks earlier, though, I kept trying to engage, to communicate via notepad, whiteboard, or a little wide-mouthed counter-yelling from time to time. But I spent far too many days near her, absorbing her perpetual victim's worldview. I'd oscillate between trying to be a good daughter/empathetic patient advocate...and leaving her bedside in a childish huff, repulsed by her abusive nature.

Upon returning to Baltimore, I fell into a depression worse than any I've experienced in 20 years. I didn't quite realize it until hitting a few successive rock-bottoms and bouncing to an ugly stop. I would receive my mother's phone complaints with a burning, passive-aggressive silence. I'd hang up and fall deeper into the dark place. I'm not ashamed to say that during this time, my therapist made a point of talking to me every two or three days. I needed that lifeline, and at least one good reason to get out of bed.

How I transformed from a distraught lump on the couch back into a relatively sane person is a story for another day--it involves equal parts daily meditation, rage-weeping, bingeing on Brooklyn Nine Nine, and receiving pushback from two friends I'd mistreated. Suffice it to say, I somehow arrived there before Mom's most recent call. This time, thankfully, her words washed over me like a temperate, low-tide wave. Gulf of Mexico waters. If I felt anything at all, it was sadness and pity for her, the incoherent shadow she's becoming now but also the fucked-up human she has been her entire life. Mostly I was disengaged, non-reactive. After a summer of heightened reactivity to match her own, my "nothing" response pleasantly

surprised me.

Once, in my early days as a thirty-something jazz piano novice, I worried aloud to a mentor about the endless list of standards, bebop, and post-bop tunes any self-respecting professional was supposed to have memorized. At that time in my life, straight-ahead jazz felt like the calling I'd almost missed. I was anxious to "catch up" to the 17-21-year-old boys I knew (yes, 100% male back then) who had similar ambitions, as well as all the time in the world to sleep in their parents' basements and smoke a shit ton of weed and do nothing else but practice and jam.

My teacher said something that was both an encouragement and a challenge. "At a certain point, you don't need to have anything memorized, really. Your ear gets so strong, and you're familiar with so many tunes, you just *know* them all."

Twenty years later, I'm beginning to understand what he meant. Much of performance excellence comes down to muscle memory, the level at which you can execute the same or similar patterns, gestures, and ideas without conscious thought because your assiduous practice has driven them toward disappearance. You've achieved the kind of effortlessness audiences crave from performers as much as sports fans crave it from athletes..

But there's another deeper level where you become truly one with your instrument. There is no conscious distance between your thoughts, even wholly original ones, and their execution at your fingertips. This is mastery. On rare occasions, I have just barely touched the outside edge of this type of *knowing*. I can sense how I might travel there more often, and one day possibly just live there. It will take continued conscious effort and a ton of practice. Constant, focused, relaxed, steady practice. Effort first, then effortlessness.

May there be an analogous emotional place to arrive at, one day. Past muscle memory. Just knowing how to be and do...nothing. In one's solitary valley, far from the tree.

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