



CASE STUDY | SARAH'S STORY

Sarah was the second of three daughters born to Tom and Marge Franklin. They lived in a middle-class neighborhood in a small town in Washington. Tom had a professional job, while Marge stayed home to raise her family.

“My father was a devout man with strong religious beliefs. He was very rigid; everything was black and white,” Sarah disclosed. “I remember him as a very strict, but loving, father. He didn’t yell often, but when he did, the ground shook. He thought his way was the only way. My sisters and I learned early that sharing our emotions was not acceptable around Dad. It made him angrier, so, if we began to cry, we ran away and hid.”

Sarah remembers having a loving relationship with her father until age four or five. Small for her age, she had sparkling blue eyes with fine features framed with dark, wispy hair. She looked like a little cherub, straight from the story *The Littlest Angel*.

One day Sarah and her father were going to have a special day. She felt excited about going on an outing with her father. “Dad took me to a pony ride. I was so excited! But before I had my turn, something made him angry. He yelled at me in a way he had never done before, and, grabbing me roughly by my arm, he whisked me away and took me home. My excitement turned to fear and disappointment.”

This was a day forever frozen in her memory. She learned to be wary when her father was mad. She and her sisters decided to keep things to themselves rather than risk his unpredictable reaction.

Several years later, a child at their church accused a respected parishioner of trying to touch her inappropriately. On the way home from church, Sarah overheard her parents talking about it in the front seat of their old Buick.

“That child is just trying to make trouble,” Tom said. “We’ve known George for years. He would never do anything like that.”

Sarah’s mother nodded in agreement. Marge had always been meek. She too had experienced her husband’s wrath. It was easier to agree with his opinions than to endure his verbal assaults.

At home Sarah and her older sister decided they should talk to their parents. Several weeks before, this man had tried to kiss and touch them. They had been able to push the man away and run. After that, they avoided being near him.

They entered the room with trepidation. “Daddy, Janet is telling the truth about Mr. Church.” Sarah timidly whispered. “He tried to touch us too.”

Their worst fears were realized when Tom bellowed, “That is not true. Why are you lying? That is a terrible thing to say. Go to your room!”

Their mother stood quietly by, never saying anything to protect them. And so, the pattern of silent mistrust took root, growing stronger over time.

As Sarah entered her teens, she began to challenge her father, but had learned to use reasoning to get what she wanted. “I wanted to get my ears pierced. All the girls had their ears pierced and I wanted to fit in,” Sarah remembered. She asked her father for permission one afternoon.

“Absolutely not! Only gypsies have their ears pierced,” he shouted.

Using her skill of reasoning, she innocently asked, “Is the minister’s wife a gypsy?”

Losing patience, Tom roared angrily, “Of course not!” Sarah knew she had him. “Well, her ears are pierced.”

“I’m not sure my dad knew what hit him, but his reasons for not allowing me to pierce my ears came crumbling down. He told me that he would never pay for anything like that, but I was one step ahead. I had already saved the money.”

Sarah navigated her way through her teen years using rationalization for meager control over her life. She met her future husband during her junior year of high school. A homecoming princess, she needed a date for the prom. A handsome wrestler asked. He was new that year, an outsider to all the kids who had known one another all their lives. All the girls had a crush on this charming newcomer. Now Sarah had to convince her father.

The prom was the beginning of a budding romance that led to marriage after graduation. It was an interfaith marriage, her being Baptist, he a Catholic. Her father disapproved from the beginning, but for the first time in his life, was unable to break the chains of love. Sarah and her husband were married in the Baptist Church to appease her father.

Tom held on to his Catholic prejudice. Later, Sarah secretly joined the Catholic Church. She and her husband were remarried. Not only were her parents not invited, they were not even told. Sarah knew her father would never forgive her.

“My dad and I remained in relationship, but things were not the same. I had to hide my personal faith from him,” Sarah sadly admitted. “My parents were never part of my children’s first Holy Communion and confirmation in the church. They missed many other opportunities with us over the years because of Dad’s judgment. I could not share my decision to convert to Catholicism and raise my children in the faith.”

Many years passed, leaving this unresolved rift continuing to cloud their relationship. They still got together, but there was a limitation to the relationship. Over time, Sarah was deeply saddened by the loss of a closer relationship with her father.

The phone rang, waking Sarah from a deep sleep. It was her older sister Lauren. “Sarah, Dad’s in the hospital. Please come.”

Eighty years old by now, he had been sick with the flu, making him weak and unstable. Then he took a fall, breaking both hips. After evaluation, the doctors admitted him to the hospital. The flu had developed into life-threatening pneumonia. Given his compromised health, surgery to repair his hips was too risky. He would never walk again.

Sarah spent the months before her father’s death traveling to see him. They had many conversations about the past. At first Tom’s judgments dominated Sarah’s efforts to support him. One afternoon in the nursing home, Tom began yelling at Sarah and Lauren. Lauren became like a small child and shrank back, but Sarah refused to let her father behave so disrespectfully toward her.

“Dad, I love you,” Sarah began. “But you’ve always been a bit of a bully when you wanted us to do things your way. There were times when we didn’t feel safe. It is time you stop trying to get us to be the way you want us to be and begin to listen to what is important in our lives.”

With Lauren standing in the background, Sarah poured out her feelings about her childhood and how unsafe she had felt. Through her tears, Sarah finally took a stand. “Dad, I have done a lot of personal healing with a therapist. There were so many times I was afraid of you. I felt so betrayed and unsafe when you didn’t listen to us after Mr. Church tried to kiss and touch us,” she yelled. “You were our father. It was your job to protect us, and you didn’t do it!”

Tom was ready to hear the truth. For the first time he not only asked what had happened—he listened. His daughters had been abused. His broad shoulders crumbled under the weight of what had happened to his daughters. “I am so sorry. I was a horrible father. I didn’t take care of you. Can you ever forgive me?” he pleaded. “What can I do to make this right?”

“You can apologize to us.” Sarah and Lauren replied in unison.

After that everything shifted. This led to them being able to talk about other things that had been denied over the years. He began to ask questions, and for the first time in his life, he listened, his defensiveness gone. It led to many additional open, honest, and genuine conversations.

Two weeks before his death, he looked at Sarah as they were saying good-bye, “Sarah, I am so proud of you. I want you to know this. You are so beautiful.” His clarity was profound. Tom had never muttered words of praise. They pierced Sarah’s heart with a joy she had never felt.

“The acceptance and pride from my father were the lasting gift,” Sarah expressed. “It overrides the challenges from the years. The resolution was positive closure, lasting peace for him and for me.”

That was the last time they had meaningful conversation. Two weeks later, the final call came.

It was Lauren. “Sarah, he’s declining faster than hospice thought. You need to come.”

Sarah had a lot of things going on at work. How could she delegate? “I knew I had to be on the next plane. He was dying, and I wanted to be there with him and my family.”

Sarah arrived to see her father semiconscious. “Hi Dad, we are all here.”

Lauren had been by her father's side almost continuously. She was exhausted and needed rest. After conferring with the hospice nurse, they agreed Lauren should go home now. Sarah would call her if there were any changes.

“That last night with my dad was very special for me,” Sarah remembered. “He knew I was there. Conversation was unnecessary. I sang to him. It was sweet and intimate. I think I felt closer to him that night than ever in my life.”

Tom died the following morning. He was at peace and complete with his life. He died with dignity.



CASE STUDY | SEAN'S STORY

On February 8, 2011, at the age of sixty-four, my father, Robert Craig Smith, died after a short battle with pancreatic cancer. He left me with fourteen words that have changed my life forever.

My dad was my best friend. As a child, I idolized him. He went to all of my baseball games and supported me in all areas of my life. He was the “good guy,” always standing up for me when things were rough. I always felt his love for me, something he never let me forget. He was my biggest fan.

When Dad was diagnosed, he told me, “If I could write my ending, I will go peacefully, by myself, with no fanfare.”

This was who my dad was, a modest man, never drawing attention to himself, maybe not even recognizing the amazing person he was. I didn't want him to die without knowing what he had been for so many others, how much he had positively impacted their lives.

A couple of months prior to his death, I planned a Celebration of Life party in his honor. I invited many friends and family members, some he hadn't seen for years. I asked them to bring their fondest memories to share. On the day of the party, he was too ill to attend. Rather than cancel it, I did what any good son would do: I prepared a video of the gathering, having each person give a personal message on camera to my dad. We all laughed and cried, sharing the special moments we had enjoyed over the years. I learned new things about Dad that day, giving me even more reason to admire the man he was. What touched me the most was how big an impact he had made on so many people.

I had every intention of transferring the video onto a DVD so I could share it with Dad, but every time I tried, there was some glitch in my equipment. I put the project on the back burner, almost forgetting it altogether.

Time seemed to pass quickly. Two months later he began to let go of the will to live. The disease was consuming him. We called hospice and set up a hospital bed in our living room, offering plenty of room for him in his final days. He requested the nurses to medicate him heavily, hoping he would pass away in his sleep.

They gave him his wish, applying two huge pain patches to provide constant relief. He was still able to communicate and kept telling me that he wasn't in any pain— but he wasn't my dad anymore. He was in an altered state of consciousness, not remembering where he was, that he had cancer, or even who my wife and children were at times.

Finally, I was able to burn a DVD of the Celebration of Life party. It was important to me that he knew what an amazing man he was, how he had touched all of us. I wanted him to know the magnitude of the legacy he was leaving for us. I wanted him to hear the words that are usually saved for a funeral.

The end was near, and my unspoken words were beginning to crush me from within. There were still things I needed to say, messages he needed to hear. Finally, I couldn't take the anxiety anymore. I called the nurse, told her I was emotionally incomplete, and asked if I could remove the pain patches for just a little while. I longed for one last conversation with my dad.

On Sunday morning, I took the pain patches off his shoulder. Later that evening, he was himself again. My wife and two children said goodnight to him, sensing this would be their last good-byes.

I stayed with him, held his hand, cried, and unloaded my heart. It was time to play the DVD. While he was unable to open his eyes to see all of the faces, he heard their voices singing out the words of endearment. Tears welled up and gently fell from the corners of his eyes. I shared with him how much he meant to me, what a special father he was, and the legacy he was leaving behind. I told him I loved him so much and was honored to be his son.

Holding his hand, I shared, "Dad, you are amazing. You were the best dad and did a great job. I love you so much. I am honored to be your son. Thank you, I love you so much."

He weakly squeezed my hand. A smile graced his face.

"Dad, are you complete? Do you need to see or talk to anyone else before you go?" I tenderly asked.

He assured me that he was complete and ready to go. And then I asked the question that was quietly screaming inside of me.

"Dad, how can I make you proud of me after you're gone?"

He shook his head as though I had asked a silly question and said, "Be who you can be, do what you can do, and live a good life."

I felt those fourteen, unforgettable words land on my heart. He had given me a torch of true wisdom that I would be honored to share with everyone I cross paths with along my journey. "I'll do my best, Dad."

Shortly thereafter I told him what I had done, taking off the pain patches for one final chat. He said "Seanie, thank you, son. I love you. Now put those things back on!" When he said he was complete, I guess he really meant it! Hours later he passed peacefully from this life.

My interview with Sean was intended to be the story of his father's death and lessons learned as they all let go. Along with the tenderness of his father's passing, Sean shared a different experience he had with his mother, both from their tumultuous relationship as he was growing up and during her last years. They healed the chasm as she faced her death. Below is the story of how she completed her life, and the depth of the healing that occurred between mother and son. A well of understanding and compassion transformed their relationship, leaving a lasting love and deep respect in Sean's heart after she was gone.

My relationship with my mother, Susan Elaine Smith, was wrought with challenges from the time I was small. My parents fought about everything, making their marriage difficult to live with. Although they waited to divorce until I turned eighteen, it took its toll. Their divorce was challenging for me, and I blamed my mother for much of their problems, something that resurfaced years later.

I carried my anger for years, distancing myself from my mother. We always seemed to be like oil and water. There were so many wasted years of misunderstanding one another. But I worked hard at releasing the anger I had harbored for so long.

My children adored her. She was Paint Grandma to them, an endearing name identifying her as the one who had introduced art into their little lives. She was a wonderful grandmother who cherished my babies, something I will always be grateful for.

Six years ago, Mom was diagnosed with lung disease caused by years of smoking and neglecting her body. My anger swelled when I first learned of her disease. "Why didn't she take better care of herself?" She was only fifty-eight years old.

Again, the years of blaming her for our distance roiled beneath my skin. I felt guilty for my anger; after all, this disease would eventually lead to her death. She would not be around to watch her grandchildren graduate from high school or college or be at their weddings. My heart wept deeply.

Sometime after her diagnosis, she called. We spoke for three hours, a record for our relationship. Mom shared stories of her childhood, something she had never done with me. She had had so many abuses as a child. I never imagined how any child, let alone my own mother, could go through such pain and betrayal.

Suddenly the blinders came off. I saw her in a new light, with a deep compassion burning in my soul. How she had survived the unspeakable atrocities of her childhood was beyond anything I could comprehend. Instead of being the "bad guy," I now saw her strength and the wisdom she had developed over time.

Our relationship was forever changed. She was vulnerable and real to me for the first time. The years of distance evaporated. A deep sense of compassion replaced my years of anger. Mom gave me a gift by sharing her whole self with me, a gift I will treasure always.

The following five years Mom had frequent hospitalizations when her breathing was difficult. These bouts became almost routine, sending off no alarms or rushes to the hospital.

My sister, Cindi, called, “Mom’s in the hospital again. This time, it’s different. Sean, you need to come.”

I arrived to find her in a coma and on life support. It hit me hard. My mom was dying. She looked so vulnerable lying there hooked up to machines meant to keep her alive. She had an advance directive, so her wishes were clear. She didn’t want her life extended if there was no chance of improvement. My sister and I made the decision nobody wants to make—to “pull the plug.”

We called friends and relatives, those she loved and who loved her. A celebration of her life was hastily organized and, throughout the day, many came to honor Mom. My wife, Cybil, brought our children, McKenna and Ecksley. It was bittersweet.

Having lost my father just the year before, McKenna and Ecksley had learned about death. This time it was their beloved Paint Grandma they would say goodbye to for the last time. This was very emotional for them, and for us, as their parents. Watching my children in pain broke my heart.

The children each made something for Paint Grandma. Entering the room, Ecksley approached with his gift, a small racecar he had painted and treasured. Holding it close to his heart, he stood by Mom’s bed. It was precious to watch as he placed the car on her chest as his final offering.

McKenna then presented her gift to Paint Grandma, a special drawing inspired by her love for Mom. It was time for her final good-bye, as she also placed her gift on my mom’s chest. As a ten-year-old, she had a little better grasp of death than her younger brother.

Shortly after, Ecksley was sitting in his chair, visibly contemplating inside his six-year-old mind, trying to figure out what was really happening. He turned to my wife and said “Paint Grandma gave me the best present ever. She taught me how to do art.”

Cybil asked if he wanted one more moment, to say those words to her too, and he said yes.

Tears streaming down my face, I watched this beautiful final exchange between a small boy and his beloved grandma. The innocence of my children and the tenderness of the moment were palpable.

Walking out the door, they both looked back for one last time. “We love you,” they whispered in unison.

My sister, a close cousin and I stayed with mom for a while and then there was just me remaining. The last few hours were special. I had a one-way conversation with Mom, telling her so many things I had never

shared. I unloaded my heart. I've heard hearing is the last sense to go, so I believe she heard my last conversation and felt my love for her.

I dozed and awoke just as she took her last three breaths. The peace she longed for was finally hers.



CASE STUDY | MARY'S STORY

In August 2012, my mother-in-law, Mary, fell. Her wrist was shattered, as was her confidence. I spent a week with her and easily fell into a routine familiar to us both. She had been declining slowly up to the fall but had enjoyed her ninetieth birthday the month prior. She was in good spirits, and we had long conversations about the road we had traveled together over the years.

One evening she shared, “Morning Star, I’ve had a good life. I’ve been fortunate to have a wonderful family and even have another great-grandson to welcome into the world.”

“He is adorable, Mary. Les has waited a long time to have a grandbaby. I have never seen her so happy,” I said. “I’m glad you’re still here to meet him. Babies remind us that we’re part of a bigger circle of life and love.”

“You and I have so many shared memories. Remember our trip to Cozumel and Isla Mujeres? I loved watching you swim with the dolphins,” she mused, “and our trip to Scandinavia. We had such fun!”

“They were very special for me too, Mary. We have seen births, deaths, moves, and travels, all the things that make up life. I love you so much and am proud that you are my mother-in-law. You have seen me at my best and at my worst. You know me pretty well!” I chuckled.

There was ease in our conversation, as we sat in her living room, a glass of Chianti in one hand, Brie and crackers in the other. This had been our evening routine as we traversed the globe. We had grown to know and love one another over our wine and cheese on our travels together.

“I don’t think I have a long time left. Sometimes when I think about it, I get a little frightened. I have always believed in God, but what if there isn’t one, what then?” Sheepishly, she said, “I feel guilty for even questioning. Am I a bad person to have these doubts?”

I looked into her eyes, seeing her quest for understanding. “My mom and I had conversations about the existence of God in her last months. She had become a spiritual agnostic during much of her adulthood, but in those last months, she wondered. I used to joke with her and say, “Mom, is there is no afterlife, you won’t know, and if there is, you’ll be pleasantly surprised. It’s a win/win! She always laughed at that.”

Mary laughed too. “I guess that is a good point!”

At the end of my week with her, she held me tight, “Thank you for coming; I knew you would. Things can happen. I just want you to know how much I love you.”

I knew this might be the last time I saw her. Tears stung my eyes as I walked out the door.

Since my grandchildren had been born, Mary had spent several Christmases with us at my daughter Sarah’s home, and each Easter we would make the pilgrimage to GG’s house in search of colored eggs. It was always a highlight for GG and the children alike.

In December, Sarah suggested we drive out for a last visit. My grandchildren, Tyler and Jordyn, were so excited. They loved their GG, the name Mary had given herself so the great-grandchildren wouldn’t have to stumble over the lengthy title Great Grandma. She thought the abbreviation sounded racy. So off to GG’s we went.

Opening the door, I saw Mary sitting on the lift chair we had gotten in August. Looking up, she smiled sweetly with a lost look and vacant eyes. It was clear she didn’t recognize us. Four months had passed since I had seen her. Her decline was dramatic. With so much weight loss, I almost didn’t recognize her.

Tyler and Jordyn ran to her. Sarah had prepared them before our arrival. They knew GG was very sick. They had never had anyone they knew die. Tyler had a friend at school whose grandmother had died, but neither child understood what that meant. After a short visit, Sarah took the children to the condo we had rented just a short walk away.

I sat down on the footstool by Mary’s chair and holding her hands in mine, “How are you, sweet one?”

Her eyes scanned my face, searching for some recollection in the cobwebs of her mind. Suddenly, her face lit up. She squeezed my hands firmly, “Morning Star, you’re here. I knew you would come back!” Tears welled up in her eyes, as the sparkle returned. The woman I knew had returned.

“Sarah and I brought Tyler and Jordyn to see you. It’s almost Christmas. We decided to come to you this year.”

“The children are here? And Sarah?”

“Sarah just took them to the place we rented. You remember that we always rent a condo close to you so we can be near. They’ll come back for a visit in a little while.” We quietly sat holding hands, speaking without words.

The next few days went quickly. Tyler and Jordyn brought a ray of sunshine to all of us. Sarah had always been a wonderful and thoughtful granddaughter and asked for some alone time with Mary. Leaving them, the urchins followed me to the croquet green to play. We searched for the little cottontail bunnies that ran rampant along the path.

Outside, the children had questions about GG. Thoughtfully, four-year old Jordyn inquired, “When will GG get better?” Her furrowed brow expressed concern.

“Kids, I think we need to have a little chat,” I said. Walking over to a low brick wall containing a flowerbed, we took a seat. “You both know that GG is very sick.”

“Uh-huh,” they both nodded. “So, when will she get better?” Tyler piped in.

“Honey, GG is very old. She is ninety years old! When people get very old, they can get sick, and not get better.”

At six, Tyler had heard stories. Authoritatively he said, “My friend’s grandma got old and she died.”

“Yes, that can happen,” I gently whispered.

“Is GG going to die?” Jordyn asked.

“Yes, sweetie. She is very sick, and she doesn’t have the strength to get better. We don’t know when she will die, but it will be soon.”

“Can we go back and see her?” Tyler asked, “Because the next time we see her she will be dead.”

So innocent were they. They asked questions about what happens when people die. I did my best to tell them what I believe. They were curious. Their questions were an effort to make sense of something we all wonder about.

That evening was our last. The caregiver was preparing Mary’s medication. Sarah and I stood by as Jordyn bounded into GG’s room, jumping up on her bed, her youthful energy in stark contrast to Mary’s twilight years. Jordyn curled up next to her GG and stroked her head gently as she softly whispered, “It’s OK, GG. I love you.”

The sweetness of that moment will stay with me forever. Four generations present, all at different stages of our own lives, like the seasons of the heart. As the scripture says, a time to be born and a time to die.

That was the last time we saw GG. Two weeks later she died peacefully at home. My last memories of Mary with Jordyn were a gift that will last a lifetime.

About Transitional Wisdom

Our Mission

EMPOWERED LIVING THROUGH INTENTIONAL AGING & GRACEFUL GOODBYES

We want to normalize the natural and sacred process of aging and death. Our mission is to help families enrich their relationships and release fear, guilt and pressure around caregiving through compassionate conversations, emotional validation and collaborative end-of-life planning.

Our Approach

At Transitional Wisdom, we provide collaborative, compassionate and practical guidance as you care for a loved one who is experiencing the challenges of illness, age-related decline and loss.

Through coaching, family consulting, and emotional estate planning, we help you and your family come together to make unified decisions, have empowered conversations, and release any unresolved family issues... so your loved one can age intentionally, maximize their independence, and complete their life peacefully.

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