

## Dying well demands living well

*You can't really be sure  
that someone had a good life  
until she is dead*

I knew long before my mother, Gladys, died that her life was good. Now that her life is over I can confidently conclude that the whole of it was outstandingly good.

All of us are of course magically transformed into wonderful beings the moment we die. Society ensures that individuals who regularly criticized or blamed us when we were alive change tune at once. My mother's life I felt was good in ways different from this post-mortem guilt-tinged cliché cleansing.

A good life is a happy life. And my mother had lessons to teach on how to lead a happy life. It should be fairly easy to be happy when life is comfortable in every way. Yet many people who have an exceedingly comfortable life manage to make a spectacularly unhappy mess of it. Looking back on the life that my mother lived, I wonder whether having had to deal with varied and serious troubles made her life good. She was never despondent for long, whatever undeserved hurt came her way. I don't recall her harbouring animosity to those that I felt had gravely wronged her. Nobody could, even through seemingly vicious conduct, spoil her generous estimation of them.

She faced deprivation during a good part of her life, which she dealt with by working out stimulating ways to earn and also by denying herself. This she did with no bitterness or a feeling that she was being noble or self-sacrificing. It was just the natural thing to do. I cannot think of anything of even moderate value that she ever bought herself – a sari, a handbag or the simplest item of jewellery. She managed all her life with whatever she got as gifts (other than for one article she bought for a close family wedding). Despite the relative neglect of herself, or perhaps because of it, she was indisputably happy nearly all the time.

The lesson to learn from her is how to be happy at the core. The secret may be to be born with the right disposition. But that conclusion offers little hope for the rest of us, just as does the recognition that her creativity served as a superb antidote to gloom. Among qualities that should be feasible to cultivate was her spirit of magnanimity and forgiveness. I doubt though that I could become anywhere near like my mother on this trait.

So is there nothing to learn from her astonishing ability to be happy, despite having to deal with much adversity? A characteristic that we too may find useful to develop was her attention to, and resulting fascination with, what was immediately presented to her senses – an unusual colour combination, the texture of a cloth, raindrops falling on vegetation, the taste of a fine chocolate, a novel melody or the croaking of frogs. Above all was her total involvement with people. Everybody was important. She lived the lesson that being connected with and caring for others secures happiness. I think this quality accounted also for her resiliency.

Two or three days before she died, I found quite a few visitors around her one afternoon. She'd deteriorated quite far by then. Around her hospital bed were a niece and grand nephews, attendants and tearful others. Another visitor, an impoverished 'odd job man' who often helped in her household and whose name I will change to 'Nimal' to preserve anonymity, stood diffidently in the background. All attention was on my mother who was propped up and coughing agonizingly from time to time in a futile effort to make breathing easier, speaking hoarsely with great effort and able to concentrate only for short spells. I leaned over to listen to something she was trying to say. 'Talk to Nimal,' she struggled to say, barely able to gesture at him with her eyes, 'he is alone'. Her drifting attention chose somehow to focus on this poor man's immediate comfort, even as her exhausted body was struggling desperately to keep her alive just a little longer. I want to remember these as her last lucid words to me. They almost were.

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