

My name is Elise Forier Edie and about forty years ago, Devra married my father. That marriage did not last but Devra and I held on to one another, and maintained a relationship. I was six years old when I met Devra, seven when she moved in with my dad and eight when they married. When I first met her, I started biting my fingernails, because I thought she was wonderful and I wanted to be like her. It was something I could do, at six; I could bite my nails. Since then, I've given up on that habit, but I have found other ways to emulate Devra. I would like to share some of the things she taught me tonight. Call them a mother's wisdom to her daughter, or ways of being and encountering the world that I learned from a lifetime spent in my mother's company.

1. Never be afraid to play with big boys

In an era when most of my friends' moms spent their time at home, packing their kids careful lunches with crustless Wonderbread sandwiches and individually wrapped Twinkies, Devra was busy hacking her way through the Panamanian jungle in a halter top, talking about electro ejaculating wolves at dinner table and spending her weekends trying to get pandas to have sex. No one I knew could believe I had this mom. I remember at zoo parties, while all the other wives seemed to hug the walls, quietly washing dishes, or making snacks in the kitchen, Devra sat the middle of the room with all the men and matched them beer for beer and point for point. She never downplayed her intelligence. She never hid her spirit. I rarely saw her demure to anyone. Devra simply held her own, without apology, at a time when almost no women did anything like that. She blazed a trail for every one of us that's come after her. "Pioneer" doesn't really begin to describe it. "Radical revolutionary" and "Fearless innovator" come close.

2. don't take no for an answer. Ever.

"No" was not really "no," for Devra. To her, "No" was a clarion call to action. It was an opportunity to rethink and restrategize--or possibly bulldoze, if need be. And while many of us found this aspect of her personality challenging at times,--especially if we were the ones daring to tell her "no"--it is one of the single biggest factors that allowed her to effect so much change in the world. Devra was never going to let a little "no" get her down, whether she was trying to breed pandas, or get a bunch of contentious, competitive scientists to collaborate. Accepting "no" was only the last goddamn resort.

Which bring me to point three:

3. a good conversation never suffers with the addition of some pungent and expressive expletives

If someone is being a fucking asshole, just say so. If something is a big pile of shit, feel free to let everyone know, in just those words Even in the middle of

very formal occasions, like a memorial service, for example to which high government officials and little old ladies are in attendance, a statement like, “Devra’s dying so suddenly was a big, fat pile of shit” is perfectly appropriate. To hell with standing on ceremony. Stand on your passion, goddammit. Say what you mean.

4. family is important

To Devra, the measure of our lives in the end was equal parts what we do, why we do it and who we do it with. She loved with the same conscious passion and energy that she did everything. Call her whatever else you like—and words like stubborn, fierce and hot headed all leap to mind, but at her core, Devra was kind, generous to a fault and loyal as the day is long. The few times in my life she sat me down and admonished me strongly were the times I neglected other people or took them for granted. “You show up for your family,” she would tell me. “You show up for them, because it’s the right thing to do.” Nothing made her happier than getting a bunch of people she really loved together and doing something—whatever!—a party, a beach trip, a movie, a corn maze-- just as long as everyone was together, everyone she loved, whether your blood, your someone else’s blood, doesn’t matter. You’re family. Come in the door, have a glass of wine. Welcome.

5. you’re never too old

Oh, name it. You’re never too old to be arrested for indecent exposure because you’re running around topless on a public beach. You are never too old to ride all the carnival rides with your granddaughter and scream really loud and eat cotton candy. You are never too old to learn something new, change your career, take up yoga, marry the love of your life, dance like no one’s watching, ask forgiveness or be forgiven. It’s never too late; it’s never too much; and you’re never too old. Period.

6. make sure you’re leaving the world a better place

There is a lot of talk tonight about all the things Devra did for animals. But her service to the world did not begin and end with her job. She gave her money generously to good causes, and she gave her time to a number of diverse organizations, she opened the doors of her home not only to me and my brother, but to a whole host of you who are here tonight. She was active in her neighborhood and volunteered at Rock Creek Park. She counseled women with breast cancer. She was fiercely altruistic and served all of us tirelessly in a hundred ways, many of them which I probably don’t even know about. But the world is certainly better for her being in it. Of that, there can be no doubt.

7. sometimes you have to surrender

I doubt very seriously that dying this year was in any of Devra's plans. I know I fully expected her to get really old and crotchety and come live with me, so we could argue and play Scrabble and drink beer in our wheelchairs. I was really looking forward to another twenty five years at least. She went in the hospital suddenly, and her last days must have been very confusing, because she had a tube down her throat, and with all the pain killers, it was probably hard to focus. Besides, it's a lot to take in. "Oh, by the way, your life is over." There was no time to say "Good bye," and "I love you," and "You are the best of me," and "Thank you." At the very end, she just went away. Devra was having no dramatic death bed scenes, no lingering, messy, long term illness, no background music swelling while her eyes fluttered and her breath caught. She just packed it in and walked off the field. Game over. I've seen Devra accept defeat only rarely, and I can count the times on one hand, but when all other options were exhausted, she really did know when to call it a day. Sometimes you have to surrender, some fights just can't be won, and in giving up the fight, you allow yourself to transform into something else. I saw her do it when her dad was sick, I saw her do it when her first marriage ended, I saw her do it when she retired from the zoo and I saw her do it in the hospital last month. I cannot believe I will have to walk through a world without her. She has been the one constant in my life I could count on for almost as long as I can remember. But it was time to go and she went, with none of her customary fierceness. But that was also Devra. Because for all of her high profile, and achievements and fame and energy, she was really a very humble person. At the end of the day, she was just a smart , sexy dame who liked a good party, who hated to be a bother, and almost never tooted her own horn. So of course she wouldn't make a big fuss about dying. It's all a part of life, after all. It all feeds into a beautiful system that every one of us is connected to. And no one knew that better than she. So in the end, Devra just took her new place in the circle, with typical humility. Which brings me to the last adage of Devra's I will share tonight .

8. be a part of life.

Participate in your own goddamn life. Don't let it pass you by. Mold it, make choices, make mistakes, celebrate, feel remorse, but don't just let it go by., Plant gardens, nurture animals, reach out to your neighbors, love your family, pass it on. Life is a gift. It is what we have. It makes us unique in the galaxy, and maybe the universe. We are lucky to have it. So live it. Live. That's what my mom taught to do. To be in my life, every day. Thank you for being a part of her life, and a part of mine.