

# Life Is What You Make It

*“Hope” is the thing with feathers –  
That perches in the soul –  
And sings the tune without the words –  
And never stops – at all –*

– Emily Dickinson

My Aunt Mimi was a teacher, mentor, second mother, and bright spirit in my life. By her side I learned knitting, sewing, the social graces, and much more: I learned how to flow with what life offers.

Looking back, I see my 12-year-old self working the pedal of Mimi’s old, black Singer sewing machine. She’s beside me, watching approvingly and giving gentle hints. In another scene, I’m having a manicure. Mimi is delicately filing each of my fingernails.

Then it’s Christmas Eve at my grandparents’ house—Mimi lived with them—and I’m opening a present from her. It’s a “Handmade by Mimi” poodle skirt with a beautiful felt cutout design. All the girl cousins receive one, and we immediately put them on and start twirling. Another Christmas, Mimi’s gifts to us are full-length red flannel nightgowns with white lace at the collar and white buttons down the front. They will keep us warm until we outgrow them. One year she sews tiny, perfect red-checked dresses and white crinoline pinafores for our eight-inch Madame Alexander dolls.

## ***Life Lessons***

Mimi took us to the movies, on walks around the neighborhood, and shopping downtown. A bunch of cousins would pile into her car and she'd drive us to Play Land—an amusement park where we would ride the Ferris wheel and eat cotton candy while she looked on.

Mimi helped me pick out my first mini-skirt and then stood by when my father saw it and hit the roof. It was the first time in my life that I was able to express what I was feeling to my dad, because Mimi said, "Go ahead, Judy, talk to your father. What do you want to say?"

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***Angels appreciate things about you that you thought no one else ever noticed.***

— Anonymous

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What I haven't told you is that Mimi lived most of her life in a wheelchair. At 13, she was a normal teenager who played the piano, sang, took ballet class, and was active in school plays. The third of five children of Greek immigrant parents, she got top grades, had lots of friends, and enjoyed good health and high spirits.

When she began to experience pain in her back in 1934, physicians couldn't find the cause. In that year, diagnostic science was not the art it is today. Time went by, and the pain grew worse. Treatments included massage, ultraviolet-ray therapy, and pain medication that did little to help. Gradually Mimi lost feeling in her legs. Paralysis began to spread.

Finally, after three weeks of progressive decline, yet another specialist was called to the house and Mimi was rushed to the hospital. The diagnosis was transverse myelitis with epidural abscess. Perhaps with today's knowledge an accurate diagnosis could have been made sooner and the abscess removed before it partially severed her spinal cord. As it was, after two surgeries, a blood transfusion, and several weeks of hospitalization, Mimi had lost the use of her lower body. The medical consensus was that she would not live for more than a year.

My grandmother set about nursing my aunt back to health. In spite of the ordeal and bleak prognosis, with the love and care of family and friends and her own positive outlook, Mimi's body healed. Although her lower body would remain paralyzed, she grew strong and able in other ways, and her spirit never faltered. People who knew her then say she spent months in bed but always had a smile for visitors. In her 80s, Mary Metskas was listed in medical record books as the longest-lived wheelchair-bound patient still enjoying excellent health and physical coordination.

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*The future is not some place we are going to,  
but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found,  
but made, and the activity of making them changes  
both the maker and the destination.*

—John Scharr, *Loyalty in America*

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### ***Constructing Meaning***

So what is this story about? A wonderful woman, a bad break, the power of love and clear vision? Yes, but what else? Why does my aunt come to mind nearly every day? What does she represent, and how do I live a happier life because of her story?

I never saw Mimi as handicapped, probably because she never saw herself that way. She lived life as if she didn't face any impediments. She learned how to get in and out of her wheelchair on her own, move the chair up and down short flights of stairs, and drive a car well into her 70s (she was one of the first to own a car with hand controls). She created beautiful handwork and had a home-based business for many years sewing costumes for a Chicago theater company.

There are days when I'm inclined to feel sorry for myself (I know, stop the presses). I become anxious about a challenge or troubled by conflict, work, or illness. And I see Mimi and the grace she displayed in meeting challenges I can only imagine. In the face of one of life's ultimate "bad breaks," she was a warrior. I know she didn't think of herself that way. I don't imagine she saw herself as anything out of the ordinary. Yet everyone who knew her says the same thing: she was an extraordinary human being. Why didn't she give up at 13? How did she continue to get up every morning and smile at life?

Mimi lived a life of discovery and courage. She took risks, transformed obstacles into opportunities, and did it all with a sense of perspective about her condition that taught me more than all of her loving words and caring acts. As she so often told me, "Judy, life is what you make it." Without fanfare or stress, without knowing that she was even doing anything special, she lived these words every day.

Mimi died at 83, with her sister by her side and her positive outlook intact, still in discovery.

It is impossible to predict what each new day will offer. We do, however, make choices in how we receive each offering—as a burden or a gift. Mimi taught me to discover the gift, and for that I am very grateful.



## **PRACTICE**

Who is your Mimi?

What models do you have who encourage  
you to live more courageously?

What do they represent, and how do you live  
differently because of them?

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*Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries.  
Don't take it serious, Life's too mysterious.  
You work, you save, you worry so,  
But you can't take your dough when you go, go, go,  
So keep repeating it's the berries  
The strongest oak must fall.  
The sweet things in life, To you were just loaned,  
So how can you lose what you've never owned?  
Life is just a bowl of cherries,  
So live and laugh at it all.*

— Lew Brown and Ray Henderson, *Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries*

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**About the Author:** Judy Ringer is the author of *Unlikely Teachers: Finding the Hidden Gifts in Daily Conflict*, containing stories and practices on conflict, communication, and living a more powerful life. She is the founder of Power & Presence Training and chief instructor of Portsmouth Aikido, Portsmouth, NH, USA. Purchase *Unlikely Teachers* or sign up for Judy's free monthly tips and articles at <http://www.JudyRinger.com>.

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