

Catching Health Podcast
Conversations About Aging: Emma, 86
March 25, 2019

Diane narration Welcome to Conversations About Aging, a Catching Health podcast. I'm Diane Atwood. Today's conversation is with Emma, who turned 86 on March 7, 2019. I recorded our conversation a month earlier, a few days before the first anniversary of the death of her husband Warren.

Diane How many years were you and Warren married?

Emma 60.

Diane A long time.

Emma Was a long time.

Diane How would you describe your marriage?

Emma Wonderful. Why? How do you stay married sixty years if it isn't, you know? What I mean, it's not that we got along, all the time, very good. You know what I mean? We had our ups and downs just like every married couple. I mean let's face it, you have to work at marriage and make it work. There's good times and there's bad times.

Diane narration The worst times were near the end of Warren's life when Emma had to confront the reality that she could no longer care for him at home. We talked about that, but we also talked about how they first met and why she finally agreed to marry him.

Warren and Emma grew up in neighboring towns in southern Maine. They didn't attend the same schools, but their families belonged to a local grange and that's where they first met, as children.

Years later, Emma's mother taught at the grammar school in Warren's neighborhood. By then Warren was in either the 8th or 9th grade at another school. But he was a word man and loved to use the dictionary at his old school — where Emma's mother taught, and where Emma would usually go after her school let out.

Diane So you hung out at the school.

Emma So I was at the school. So that's where we really got to know each other.

Diane And Warren would come in to use the dictionary.

Emma That's right, yeah.

Diane Was it love at first sight?

Emma No, definitely was not. Laughs

Diane Well, whatever happened then?

Emma Well, years went by and I don't know. I, what did happen? I was out of high school probably two years out of high school before he called for our first date.

Diane Takes his time, doesn't he?

Emma Well, yes he did. But we weren't interested in each other when he was here, coming at school. I didn't think much about him.

Diane So when he called you for that first date, what did you do? Do you remember the first date?

Emma Yeah, We went on a double date with John and Betty.

Diane Who are neighbors here in the community.

Emma Well, of course, he had grown up with John and they were married by that time and so. that's about it.

Diane Where'd you go on the double date?

Emma We took a moonlight cruise down the bay.

Diane That's lovely. That's so romantic.

Emma It was very nice. Yes, it was.

Diane How long after that did you get married?

Emma Couple of years because we went together for a while. That first date was in July. It was about the middle of July and we went together until about November and then I decided I didn't want to go with him anymore.

Diane Why?

Emma I just didn't. I would've wanted to go with somebody else maybe and as long as I was going with him nobody else was going to ask you out. And not only that, but I was working and having a good time. You know, I was still living at home, but lots of time. I was in Portland. I don't think I had a car. I'm pretty sure I didn't. Maybe I did have a car. I can't remember. Lord, that was a long time ago, but anyway, I had friends in Portland and I'd stay in town with them a lot of times because they had an apartment.

Diane You were in your early twenties by then?

Emma Yes. Yeah.

Diane So you enjoyed being in town, having a good time?

Emma Yes, I did. And I can understand why young people want to be in Portland, you know, they want to be in Portland. Well, I did. You know, we had a wonderful time.

Diane A lot more to do than out here.

Emma Right.

Diane What did you like to do?

Emma When I was in Portland? We, we'd go out to eat maybe and then sometimes we went to the nightclub at the hotel and saw the floor show, you know, and that was it.

Diane It's funny because nobody says floor show anymore.

Emma No

Diane I don't even know if they have

Emma I was gonna say do they still have 'em? I don't know. I don't go to those places anymore.

Diane And so if you had stayed with Warren, you would've been stuck out here in the suburbs.

Emma Well, yeah, probably. I don't know. When we went together, we did things, to tell the truth, I can't remember what we did do.

Diane Well, did you break up with him?

Emma Yes. I, we broke up and then he'd still come around every once in a while. And he'd keep coming, he'd appear at the door, you know, and then one time he came and there was going to be a comet that we could see

and of course he was very interested in the stars. He says I want to show you this comet and I thought, oh good Lord, I did.

Diane You obliged him ...

Emma But I did. I thought, eh, I might just as well, you know.

Diane You're so funny.

Emma And we went down by Daigles, you know where I'm talking about? Where the potato fields used to be on the back road there because we could see the whole thing there. we had a good view and we saw the comet and after that I went out with him again and again and again.

Diane Well isn't that interesting? So something magical happened that night?

Emma Evidently. Must have, you know.

Diane Maybe he had a sixth sense if I just bring her to see the comet.

Emma I don't know. He was just very persistent.

Diane So he won you over?

Emma He won me over eventually, yes.

Diane And I don't think you ever regretted it?

Emma No, I never did.

Diane You went on to have two kids and suddenly, here you are, and he passed away, just ... how long has it been now?

Emma It'll be a year. The 10th of this month.

Diane It does not seem possible that it's been a whole year.

Emma It's been a whole year.

Diane And he was sick for awhile, quite a while.

Emma Oh, yeah, quite a while. Really, the last five years of his life he was not good.

Diane He got Parkinson's disease? Was that the major thing?

Emma It was, but before that he had problems. Do you remember him having an awful cough?

Diane I do. He was always clearing his throat.

Emma Yes, and cough, cough, cough. It was just an allergy, just an allergy.

Diane And it wasn't?

Emma He ended up, they called it eosinophiic pneumonia in town and they put him on cortisone and he was on cortisone for over a year.

Diane Did it help him?

Emma It did help him, but when he tried to go off he'd start coughing again and eventually they did get him off, but he was on it for so long that that was the reason they said he got a fracture in his back, you know.

Diane As a result of being on the cortisone for so long?

Emma Mmmmm. See, that works on the bones.

Diane I didn't realize that. So he got off it but it affected his bones and so he had a fractured back.

Emma Hmm huh. And it was when he was getting over this that I noticed that he was beginning to have problems with moving his feet.

Diane Just kind of one thing after another? Serious things.

Emma It was.

Diane It must've been very hard for you to watch him go downhill like that ... my memory of him was ...

Emma It was very hard

Diane ... he was very active and very interested in everything.

Emma And before he was sick, he would spend hours at the computer writing and looking things up and everything. And after he got sick, he never went near the computer. He wouldn't go in.

Diane Because did he forget how to use it or he just couldn't sit there anymore?

Emma Of course, he did a lot of writing, you know.

Diane He belonged to the writing club here?

Emma Yeah.

Diane He wrote poetry.

Emma He wrote poetry.

Diane He's written books.

Emma And you know, I said to him why don't you go in and try writing. He says, I don't have any imagination. I don't have anything to write about. You know, like it's gone.

Diane That must've been hard for him.

Emma It was very hard for him I think. Yup. It was very hard.

Diane And because of the Parkinson's, that affected his memory and his ability to communicate too, didn't it?

Emma Yeah, it does. Not too much memory so much as there was no communication. He didn't generate anything. What I mean, if you went to visit him you had to do the talking and he would answer you yes or no, but as far as actually a two way conversation, there wasn't any.

Diane And he was always an instigator. Always had some witty thing to say.

Emma Yes, yes. Yeah.

Diane So, now it's been almost a year since he's gone. How has that been for you? How have you adjusted to it?

Emma I personally feel that I adjusted easier than had it been a very sudden thing because I kind of got used to his, well he was here, but there would be hours that would go by that neither one of us would say anything to each other, you know.

Diane You would just sit beside each other and ...

Emma A lot of times or I'd be off doing working or whatever, you know, doing my thing and, and he'd be sitting reading and so forth. And then, of course, when he went to the nursing home. He was gone.

Diane How long was that that he lived there?

Emma He was there nine months.

Diane So you had nine months without him being here, but you had him to go to?

Emma Yeah, I was there every day. But it was at that time that I really missed him. I would say that I was grieving because I would come home and there was nobody here, you know.

Emma And I'd think, what have I done, you know.

Diane What do you mean, you thought what have I done by ... were you taking responsibility for having ...

Emma Well, I guess so, yes. What I mean, I'd come home and it was, you know, the house was just empty and it was as if he wasn't here, you know, he wasn't here.

Diane So it was a difficult decision, but he needed to be in the nursing home, right?

Emma I couldn't do it any longer, Diane. I couldn't take care of him any longer.

Diane Tell me why you couldn't. What was ...

Emma Well, my back was beginning to bother me and there was times that I just, I just was so tired.

Diane I think there's probably a lot of spouses who take on that responsibility for whatever reason, far longer than is healthy for them to be able to do it.

Emma Definitely. I believe that now. I do, I really do.

Diane And that even after you make the right decision ...

Emma But it is something that, well, I don't know if other people feel this way, but I just felt that I wanted to do it, you know. I didn't feel that I wanted anybody else taking care of him. I did have people come in and they were helping here. But it's just, and I don't know whether if everybody feels this way or not. What I mean, of course, I was brought up this way almost.

Diane To take care of people?

Emma In that my grandmother lived with us and when she was sick my mother took care of her and my mother lived at home and my sister took care of my mother and this is the way it's gone, you know?

Diane So how did you get to the point when you realized, I cannot do this anymore? Was it a gradual thing? Did you wake up one morning and say, I can't do it anymore?

Emma It was a while before I, I don't know, I guess I would say that there was quite a while that I thought, how much longer can I do this? You know, I, see that I was getting tired and I was getting worn out and I thought, how much longer can I do this before I actually said that I can't, I just can't do it any longer.

Diane Was it easy? Was the process easy for you once you made the decision? Did it all go smoothly?

Emma Yes, it did. It went much smoother than what I thought it would because I thought, oh, I'll never, they probably will have to, I'll have to wait and wait to get him in.

Diane How about him? Did he even understand what was going on by that point?

Emma He did. He did.

Diane And do you know how he did?

Emma I don't think. I know he didn't want to go and I didn't want him to go, you know, but ...

Diane Is it something that you talked about long before he was sick?

Emma No. I don't know that we ever talked about it really, but I think that at the time that I told Warren I can't do this anymore. He knew it because he didn't, he didn't like being the way that he was and having, he knew it was a kind of a burden. I told him that I wanted to take care of him as long as I could and so forth, but um, I don't know.

Diane Well, once he was there, you went to see him every single day. You were there, you didn't ...

Emma No, I definitely, I hated to have him over there.

Diane You had a lot of things to adjust to. You had to adjust to coming home to the empty house.

Emma That was, that was the hardest part, it really was.

Diane So when you would come home after being with him during the day, how did you manage that loneliness that you felt?

Emma I don't know. I guess I watched TV and I really don't know, Diane, you just kind of know it. It was when I would come in the house. I think, gee, you know, it's lonely. The only thing that was here was the cat. Thank goodness the cat was here.

Diane What about other people? How do other people treat you, especially at this time?

Emma Wonderfully. Lord. I don't know what I done without my, my neighbors and so forth, friends.

Diane Sometimes people don't know what to say.

Emma I know.

Diane They don't know how to act.

Emma No, you don't know how to act and so forth. I realize that and I don't with other people, you know, it's, it's hard.

Diane Having been there, what's some advice you could give?

Emma I don't know that there is any advice. I think everybody is different. There's some people that seem to always be able to say the right thing, you know? Unfortunately, I'm not one of them. I really am not.

Diane What do you mean?

Emma I just. A lot of times I just never know what to say to anybody and I'm so afraid I'll say the wrong thing that I don't say anything and that's even worse.

Diane Once Warren died, you didn't have your daily trips to visit him.

Emma No.

Diane So that sense of being alone was even more profound. Did it, did it change for you or not?

Emma Yeah, I think it did. It did a little. But, what I mean, I knew, I knew definitely, you know, he was gone and, but I don't think I had as much grief as if he'd been here the day before, you know, I had gotten used to his not being here. But, of course, there were always times that, you know, when you're looking at things and you see something and you think, oh, what is that? Oh, I should ask him. And then all of a sudden you realize, well I can't ask him, you know. I started going through some of the old pictures and stuff that I had around, you know. And I think I wonder who that is. Nobody, nothing written on the back, you know.

Diane It all goes by so fast, doesn't it?

Emma Very fast, very fast.

Diane And we don't realize that when we're younger.

Emma No, we don't.

Diane it's just when you're older and you realize that your span ...

Emma Right, oh, I know, It just, time flies, it really does. What I mean, I can't make it seem that it's possible that he's been gone a year.

Diane When you look back at all of your years together, if you could change anything, would you?

Emma I don't think so.

Diane Nothing you would have done differently?

Emma No, I don't think there is.

Diane You still would have broken up with him and had a little bit of fun in Portland.

Emma I am very glad that I broke up with him the first time because I had probably at least two and a half to three years probably between the time.

Diane Oh, I didn't realize it was that long. So you've got to sow your wild oats and ...

Emma Yeah. Yeah, and I can remember after we were married, I would hear of young people that were getting married right out of high school and I thought, gee, I'm awful glad I didn't. I had some time to do as I wanted to do, you know.

Diane Well that's some wise advice. Let's hope somebody listens to you.

Emma I really did.

Diane Well, now

Emma People are all different, you know.

Diane What makes it a good day for you now?

Emma A good day. When there's things going on or that I'm going somewhere or doing something with friends or whatever. That makes it a good day. When there are days that I just, well I'm here and nothing's happening, it's really kind of blahy.

Diane And you sit in front of the TV, maybe?

Emma No, I don't.

Diane You do your puzzles.

Emma I do my puzzles. Yeah. Or I do my rug hooking.

Emma I enjoy going to these hook ins, they call them.

Diane The rug hooking?

Emma Yeah, where you go in and you're in with all the other rug hookers and you're seeing what they're doing and you know, and it's wonderful, you know, you're not really doing much of anything except hooking, but you see other people and talk with them, see what they're doing and think, oh, my, maybe I can try that on my rug.

Emma I went with a friend of mine, this was back in August it was, I guess, we went to Brewer. We went and stayed overnight. But to think of going alone now I would never think of going alone.

Diane So you still want to go and do these things?

Emma I would like to go and do them, but I wouldn't go alone now wherein before wouldn't have bothered me a bit to take off for Brewer or Bangor or Aroostook or wherever.

Diane So how old are you now? Big Smile on your face. How old?

Emma 85.

Diane You're 85. When's your birthday?

Emma March.

Diane How's that feel? You smiled when you, when I asked you. Can you believe it that you're going to be.

Emma No, I can't. I can't believe it.

Emma You know, it is strange. I never thought of it before until just not too long ago. Before I was 80 I never felt old. Never, never felt old at all. And it's been just the last few years, of course, a lot of that may have been

because I was taking care of Warren and I was tired and so forth that, that I really felt my age.

Diane What does that feel like?

Emma I can't tell you, cause there's no words. What I mean, just all of a sudden you realize, yee, I'm 85 years old. How'd I get to be 85 years old? You know.

Diane narration In the year since Warren's death, Emma has been able to gain back her strength and is taking good care of herself. I visited her the other day and she was looking forward to a birthday celebration with her family, another rug-hooking event, and going out with a group of friends. Busy woman.

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