

# Troubled daughter grows up

**BY MARY SCHMICH**

Sunday, August 7, 2011

My sister Gina received her first cellphone as a birthday gift a few days ago.

Until recently, Gina had insisted that a cellphone was too complicated for her, a plausible statement given how many things she finds hard.

For years, she found bathing complicated, so she rarely stepped into a tub or shower. Brushing her teeth felt complicated, so her teeth went bad. Cleaning her room felt like climbing a mountain, so her room devolved into a jungle of junk with a skinny path to the unmade bed. In the final weeks of her old cat's life, she found it too complicated to pick up the cat feces on the carpet, so she neatly laid a paper towel over each set of droppings.

When Gina was little, doctors said she had an IQ of 34, and though they were far wrong, the right diagnosis has never been clear. Mild autism. Borderline personality disorder. The verdict seems to have changed almost as often as her medications.

What is clear is that Gina is different, so she always lived with our mother and our mother lived with the question: What will happen to Gina when I die?

Gina worried too. As Mama grew frail, Gina often climbed in her bed in the middle of the night to weep.

"Honey," my mother would soothe her, "you'll be OK," and my siblings and I, unconvinced, told our mother we'd make sure she was.

In the months leading up to my mother's death, Gina began to change. She calmed down, some. She took pride in making Mother's morning coffee. When one of my brothers or I bathed our mother, Gina held the towels. When we'd lift Mother off the portable commode next to the sofa where she

slept, Gina was quick to say, "I'll empty it."

But after Mama died, we braced for Gina's familiar rages. We talked about how to handle her when she burst into shrieks at the memorial.

On the morning of the service, she found me while I washed my face.

"Do you think," she began. "Do you think it would be OK if don't go? I just. I just think the best way for me to honor Mom today is to take a shower and brush my teeth and go out on the bus."

And that's what she did.

With clean hair, in new brown capris and shin-high socks from Target, she rode the bus from store to store that day, along a route she rides for hours almost every day just for fun. She visited with clerks and pharmacists she considers her best friends, telling them her mom was gone.

"Mom would be proud of me for being independent," she said when she got back.

In the year since, Gina has lived alone, next to one of our brothers. She has given up soft drinks, after years of a dozen a day. She has gone to the dentist, and her teeth, minus several that had to be pulled, are white again.

She showers.

And now, thanks to two brothers, she is a modern woman with a cellphone. I called her on it last week.

"I'm doing a lot of things I never thought I'd be doing," she said with a big laugh. "Living alone! And a cellphone!"

I try to understand my sister's transformation, to trust that it will last. It's one of the most mysterious and beautiful things I've ever witnessed, though maybe it's no more complex than this:

When your greatest fear comes to pass and you survive, you discover who you really are.